

ON THE OCCASION OF DEATH :
APPROACHES TO PREACHING AT FUNERALS

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VICTORIA ITALIANO LEE

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In Memory Of :

Peter James Italiano

Katherine Marie Italiano

This is that “GOOD” day we were always working towards!

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vi
Abstract	vii
Chapter 1 : Introduction & Overview	1
Chapter 2 : Theological Framework	6
A Brief Look at Commonly Used Scriptures	15
Chapter 3 : History of Funerals, Literature Review, Practical Suggestions	23
The Evolution of Funeral Sermons/Homilies	23
Literature Review	26
General Observations Worth Considering	30
Biblical Preaching on the Occasion of Death	33
Chapter 4 : A Collection of Sermons Preached on the Occasion of Death	42
Introduction	42
Sermon on the Occasion of Accidental Death	44
Sermon on the Occasion of Suicide	58
Sermon on the Occasion of the Death of a Child	69
Sermon on the Occasion of the Death of a Soldier	86
Sermon on the Occasion of the Death of a Non-Believer	94
Sermon on the Occasion of a Death Following Long-Term Illness I	101

Sermon on the Occasion of a Death Following Long-Term Illness II	113
Sermon on the Occasion of the Death of a Stranger	125
Sermon on the Occasion of a Death by Homicide	139
Sermon on the Occasion of Natural Death	150
Sermon on the Occasion of the Death of a Spiritual Icon	163
Sermon on the Occasion of the Accidental Death of a Young Adult	177
Chapter 5: Project Outcomes	188
APPENDIX	193
WORKS CITED	194
Vita	197

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To God Be the Glory... Great Things He Hath Done!

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project is to provide a resource to clergy who will have to preach at a funeral. It includes a theological framework that encompasses the theological issues surrounding death and dying, as well as God's role in our suffering. Also included is a historical look at the development of the funeral sermon from the ancient Greek eulogies through the present time. Application of Haddon Robinson's approach to expository preaching is provided in the context of preparing for funeral sermons. There is a collection of twelve sermons from preachers currently serving as active ministers that were given on various occasions of death including : suicide, homicide, death of a child, death following long-term illness, death of a stranger, death of a non-believer, death of a soldier, death of a spiritual icon, natural death, and the tragic death of a young adult. In addition, each sermon includes an overview and commentary along with an interview of the preacher who delivered the sermon. The project concludes with the general observations gleaned from the preparation of this project and insight into the future of preaching at funerals.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction & Overview

Death is inevitable. As preachers and practitioners of the Gospel, we deceive ourselves if we honestly believe that we will not encounter death in the life of our ministry. And although pastoral care for families in times of grief tends to be paramount, preachers have the responsibility to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel in all seasons of life, including death.

The greatest challenge, in relation to death, dying, and funerals, which faces theologians-in-residence, those who serve particularly in the local parish, is a loss of hope. “Few people really believe in life after death” (Kubler-Ross 29). This challenge is not one that was as prevalent in generations past. “Much less commonly than at any other time in this millennium do the dying nowadays turn to God and the promise of an afterlife when the present life is fading” (Nuland 256).

And so, those of us who stake our lives on the promise of the resurrection find ourselves in a position of having to bring comfort and words of assurance to those who may actually find what we have to say as completely irrelevant to their life situation. Scripture speaks to the broken-hearted, the grief-stricken, and the lost. A wise preacher will combine a careful exegesis of the Scripture with a compassionate pastoral heart when preaching on the occasion of death.

“Pastoral preaching is called upon to bridge the gaps between these two orientations [preaching and counseling], to speak the Word but to speak it in a way and at a time when it impacts on the existential world of the parishioner” (Aden 47).

“Preaching declares what is believed; counseling deals with what is experienced”
(Aden 46).

Although there is much to be said about the pre-work, the counseling and the visitation that occurs beforehand with the dying and those that love them, ultimately a service as a witness to the resurrection is for the benefit of those left behind. To be sure pre-death visitation and counseling opens the preacher to avenues of communication that are possible in the context of a funeral homily, that would otherwise not be readily available. However, regardless of the circumstances, it would be irresponsible to underestimate the impact that even the most simple of funeral services has on those who are left behind, the listeners, who are the intended beneficiaries of such a service. Scott Gibson reflects, “the experiences I had in the pastorate, as I walked with families through grief, forged a connection that lasted long after the funeral sermon and service. It is called ministry. We can form links with our listeners by caring for them, by loving them, by knowing them, and by pointing them to scripture” (54).

Ultimately, the theological issues to be considered when preparing a funeral homily or sermon are unequivocally issues of life and death. If, in fact, there is no promise of life beyond death, this life becomes meaningless to those who move forward through it without a sense of purpose. Within the context of a funeral, and in fact, throughout the dying process, there are two major theological issues worthy of attention.

First and foremost is the promise made to believers and would-be believers by our Savior, Jesus Christ in the Gospel according to John, chapter 11, verse 25, “I am

the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”¹ The challenge presented to practical theologians is one of translating this passage into a relevant and believable truth to those who are seeking reassurance at the least and those who come with an attitude of skepticism and irrelevancy at the most.

The second theological issue that poses a challenge, and yet significant opportunity, is the concern over God’s role and participation in suffering and in death. What kind of good God allows a three year-old to come down with a fatal bout of leukemia? Where is God when a father of four is suffering a loss of dignity and function as he battles a vicious cancer with chemotherapy? Why didn’t God step in when a teenager held a gun to his head and blew his brains out?

It is this second theological issue that is almost a greater challenge than the first, because this challenges the faithful. As Walter Kaiser states, “therein lies the greatest obstacle and danger for believers : how can God’s love and justice be reconciled with our pain” (31)? This project will look at how many faithful preachers and theologians have wrestled with these theological issues.

Both the medical and theological fields have much to contribute to those of us on the front lines of parish ministry. Over the last century much research and writing has been done on the topics of death and dying, as well as grief. There seems to be a growing interest in death issues across all areas of academic study. Further discussion of some of the research and resources available will be covered in later chapters.

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture passages are presented from the New Revised Standard Version translation.

The goal of this thesis-project is to examine a variety of approaches to the exposition and delivery of the scriptures on the occasion of funerals. Because most funerals are unexpected, preachers find themselves preparing for such events in the midst of an already hectic and overwhelming schedule. Funerals do not replace regularly scheduled worship and therefore need to be developed alongside of the other responsibilities including regular sermon preparation. In addition the purpose of a funeral sermon is not the same as a regular Sunday sermon. The purpose of a funeral sermon is “pastoral rather than evangelistic. The aim is to comfort those who mourn, that is, strengthen their hearts in God” (Blackwood 136). Or, as Bryan Chapell presents it, “the main purpose [of a funeral and funeral sermon] is to bring the hope of the gospel to loved ones facing the pain of death” (346). These time constraints and shift in purposes create a great need for a preacher to be able to quickly access the wisdom, research, and exegesis of fellow preachers who have had to walk down such roads ahead of them.

This thesis-project is an attempt to consolidate and organize the resources of many preachers, pastors, and theologians into one accessible reference book as a foundational approach to sermon preparation on the occasion of a funeral. The project will include : a presentation of the theological issues surrounding death, dying, grief, and loss, an examination of Biblical viewpoints surrounding death, and a historical look at the evolution of funerals, memorial services, and funeral sermons/homilies. It will also include the basic considerations and steps towards constructing and developing a funeral sermon or homily. Finally it will include a collection of actual sermons that have been preached by pastors who are regularly

engaged with the task of preaching, and some potential templates/outlines of funeral sermons to assist preachers in the preparation process.

In regards to the collection of actual sermons, the aim is to accumulate sermons in the following areas : on the occasion of natural death, on the occasion of death following prolonged illness, on the occasion of the death of a child, on the occasion of tragic death, on the occasion of the death of a non-believer, and on the occasion of the death of a stranger. In addition to collecting the manuscripts for each sermon, a detailed interview will be conducted with each preacher to determine the details of such an occasion and to discuss their approach and preparation for the final sermon delivered.

The final project will be the combination of a collection of sermons accompanied by extensive interviews that will distinguish this project from previously published work. For example, in Bush's This Incomplete One, sermons are presented with only a meager explanation of the situation and simple biography of the preacher. Likewise, Gibson's Preaching for the Special Services provides a basic "how to" but lacks any finished sermons to examine.

As a result of this work, front line preachers who often find themselves buried in a myriad of other pastoral duties will have an accessible resource to consult quickly when the final stages of this earthly life come to completion right before their very eyes, and often, when they least expect it.

CHAPTER TWO

Theological Framework

Effective preaching must take into account the integrity and conviction of the preacher himself. Funeral homilies are no exception and in fact demand that the preacher proclaim the Good News with personal integrity and theological conviction. It would be unwise for one to preach at a funeral without a great clarity of theological beliefs surrounding death and resurrection. If you do not believe in the resurrection, then there is no need for you to preach at a Christian funeral.

It would behoove any preacher to seriously consider their own mortality, their own thoughts and concerns about death and dying, and their own relationship to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, long before they preach their first funeral homily. Without a solid grasp of their own issues (i.e. the fear of death or life after death) surrounding death and resurrection they will not be able to effectively deal with the other theological issue relating to funerals and death - that issue being God's role in our suffering.

God's role in suffering and ultimately in death is the other essential theological issue that needs some thought and will need to be addressed in proclamation if any effort is going to be made to comfort the family and provide them with the necessary resources to maintain their faith. This issue is important because the death has already occurred, whether or not anyone was ready for it. Now, as the preacher, one must address God's hand in the recent course of events. A preacher will not be able to extend the comfort of God's grace and mercy if their only answer

to a hurting, grieving family is to blame the death of their loved one on God or God's will.

This chapter will address the theological issues surrounding death, dying, and resurrection. It will also address theological issues of God's role in suffering and death, so that the preacher may be prepared to speak the Good News in what is often seen as a bad time. It cannot be stressed enough that a preacher's personal theology in all issues pertaining to death and resurrection should be wrestled with prior to any funeral-related speaking engagement. You simply cannot preach the resurrection if you don't believe in it for yourself.

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who believes in me will never die" (John 11:25). These sentences of scripture are the lynchpin sentences for those who call themselves Christians and believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Any pastor who attempts to preach a funeral homily that does not rely fully on this conviction, even if this is not exact scripture used, fails families, the departed, and the faithful. If there is no hope in the resurrection then the underlying message becomes that there is no purpose to this life and therefore, the death and funeral of a person is nothing more than a final formality that must occur before they can be disposed of for good. Preachers must believe in a resurrection for "if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:14a).

"The belief has long died that suffering here on earth will be rewarded in heaven. Suffering has lost its meaning. If we are no longer rewarded in heaven for our suffering, then suffering becomes purposeless in itself" (Kubler-Ross 29).

Modern preachers are faced with a growing challenge as Kubler-Ross's statement suggests because as culture shifts away from faith, preachers must hold fast to and defend the conviction of life after death to a society that is no longer convinced of it. Dr. Stanley Nuland, a medical doctor, echoes this reality in his book How We Die by writing, "much less commonly than at any other time in this millennium do the dying nowadays turn to God and the promise of an afterlife when the present life is fading" (256).

John Calvin, in reflecting on the purpose of human life, wrote, "let the aim of the believer in judging mortal life, then, be that while they understand it to be of itself nothing but misery, they may with greater eagerness and dispatch betake themselves wholly to meditate upon that eternal life to come" (716).

As Christians, we need a resurrection. If Jesus did not overcome death then the last 2,000 years have been nothing but perhaps the greatest hoax of all-time. Our faith is based on the conviction that we will one day enter into the Church Triumphant and sit at feet of God to live forever in His eternal glory. If in fact the resurrection ever proved false, not only would there be a crisis of faith, but a crisis of purpose of life for believers.

For preachers who preach on the occasion of death, their message is not only one of comfort, but a message of hope and purpose for the lives that remain on this side of glory. There is still a resurrection to come for those believers left behind and a good preacher will recognize the occasion of a funeral as one in which he/she can shed scriptural insight into the purpose of the lives left to be lived. Calvin wrote, "For it is a shame for us to be no better than brute beasts, whose condition would be

no whit inferior to our own if there were not left to us the hope of eternity after death” (712).

To that end, the preacher, J. Howard Edington, spoke of both life and death in Jesus Christ at the funeral of his own son, John David. “The great tragedy in life is not to die, not even to die young. The great tragedy is to die without having lived. And the ultimate tragedy is to die without having lived with Christ and for Christ” (Bush 76).

Although there is much to be said about the purpose of life before death, this entire project is a result of the reality that death does occur. For that reason, it is important to think through what we believe about the state of mortals after death and the resurrection of the dead themselves. The Westminster Confession of Faith addresses these issues with succinct clarity.

1. The bodies of men, after death, return to dust and see corruption; but their souls (which neither die nor sleep), having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them. The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies; and the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day. Besides these two places for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none. 2. At the last day, such as are found alive shall not die, but be changed: and all the dead shall be raised up with the self-same bodies, and none other, although with different qualities, which shall be united with their souls forever. 3. The bodies of the unjust shall, by the power of Christ, be raised to dishonor; the bodies of the just, by his Spirit, unto honor, and be made conformable to his own glorious body. (Chapter XXXIV)

Ultimately, “the resurrection of Jesus Christ means that God has reversed the story, reversed the odds, reversed the direction – from death to life” (qtd. in Bush 143). “Jesus is God’s life to a dying world” (qtd. in Bush 135).

Inevitably there comes a time in the life of every preacher where they are faced with giving a funeral homily for a confessed non-believer. Jesus said clearly, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Therefore, if we hold Scripture as an authority in our lives, it would be blasphemous for a preacher to indicate any sense of an eternal life for non-believers. That being said, all judgment is reserved for Christ alone and ultimately the preacher cannot make an eternal pronouncement on those who died as non-believers. It has been my experience in these situations that funerals are more of a cultural expectation than a religious encounter. Still, for whatever reason, masses gather and the Word should be proclaimed regardless of the beliefs or lack thereof of the non-believer. The eternal fate of the deceased already rests in the hands of God and preachers are charged with proclaiming the Good News to those left behind. Barbara Schmitz writes, “a funeral homily may be the greatest opportunity to reach the lost that we regularly forfeit” (24). It is important to remember that regardless of the circumstances, any time a funeral is held within the Christian context it is first and foremost a worship service to the glory of God in witness to resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The second theological issue that must be addressed is God’s role in suffering and death. To be clear, not all who die necessarily suffer during their death. But, suffering also refers to those who are left behind with their grief.

Question 42 of the Heidelberg Catechism asks, “Since, then, Christ died for us, why must we also die?” The answer is, “our death is not a reparation for our sins, but only a dying to sin and an entering into eternal life.” Jesus Christ died and rose to

pay for our sins once and for all. The death and resurrection of Christ was God's reconciliation with a fallen and broken world, that He loved so much that He sent His only Son to die for our sins. To that end, "all who believe in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

Calvin wrote, "if believers' eyes are turned to the power of the resurrection, in their hearts the cross of Christ will at last triumph over the devil, flesh, sin, and wicked men" (718). Although Calvin speaks of the heart, often those who find themselves wrestling with God during the loss of a loved one are trying to reconcile their predicament in their head. Clearly Christ triumphed over death through the resurrection and we are promised that all who are baptized in Christ are baptized into His resurrection. Romans 6:3-5 asks us, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." And although we may in fact "know" this Good News, the preacher is challenged with communicating this hope to grieving hearts and questioning minds.

The truth of the matter is that we simply do not have all of the answers surrounding the deaths of those we care about. We cannot deny mourners their grief. We cannot brush aside their sorrow and we must recognize it as a valid meaningful feeling in their lives at that moment. Even "Jesus wept," (John 11:35) when his friend Lazarus died. But, regardless of pain, grief, and loss, it would be

irresponsible for us to proclaim anything other than what we believe in faith to be true. Therefore, when we preach on any occasion of death, that of a toddler, a teenager, a mother of three, or an 87 year-old woman, we cannot preach to explain God's actions or God's will, we can only preach with integrity that which we know as truth – that Jesus Christ is truth and those who believe in him will never die.

William Sloane Coffin, preaching on the occasion of the death of his own son, said, “the one thing that should never be said when someone dies is, ‘it is the will of God.’ Never do we know enough to say that” (Bush 57). Kubler-Ross echoes this thought by writing, “it is equally unwise to tell a little child who has lost her brother that God loved little boys so much that he took little Johnny to heaven. When this little girl grew up to be a woman she never solved her anger against God” (21).

Let us examine then what we know as truth as revealed to us in scripture. We know that God is not apathetic to our suffering. “How can Christians talk about the apathy of the God who ‘so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son’ (John 3:16) for its salvation” (Migliore 73)? Often in times of suffering we forget that we exist, that we were created out of God's good pleasure because God loves us and wants to be in a relationship with us. God did not wind us up, set us in motion, and then walk away so that we might fend for ourselves.

God understands suffering. Jesus called God, “abba” meaning Father. God is a parent who gave up his very own Son for those whom He loved. Therefore, it cannot be claimed that God is a detached God who simply doesn't care. In fact, as Walter Kaiser suggests, “part of the healing process in working through tragedy in all its forms is the act of pouring out our complaint to God” (47). As preachers, we

cannot deny those who mourn their grief or perhaps, their anger. Our God is big enough to handle the anger, the pain, the anguish because even in these forms we continue our relationship with God.

God's love for us is steadfast. "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning" (Lamentations 3:22-23a). "The most comforting news Scripture has for the sufferer is that where pain, grief, and hurt are, there is God. One of the greatest promises in the Bible, which speaks to all our fears, is bound up in the very name of our Lord – Immanuel: 'God with us' (Kaiser 13). God's compassion is more than enough to cover our sorrow.

Because we know that God is not apathetic, that God understands suffering, and that God's love for us is steadfast, we have reasons for both hope and comfort. Although we may feel cut off from God in times of grief, Lamentations 3:31 tells us, "for the Lord will not reject us forever." Grief is not a permanent condition and we hope that it will one day come to an end. We also read in scripture that God does not afflict us willingly. "For he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone" (Lamentations 3:33). Therefore, we can take comfort in knowing that the death of a loved one is not a retributive act on the part of God.

When we examine what it is that we believe as truth, we are able to respond with integrity to the very first question in the Heidelberg Catechism,

What is your only comfort, in life and in death?" The answer is, "that I belong – body and soul, in life and in death – not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal

life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

There is no comfort for the grief-stricken outside of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Without a resurrection, everything in God's creation would be rendered meaningless. The empty tomb is God's demonstration to the world that death has lost its power, lost its sting. Death is never the end for those who believe in resurrection. Resurrection is more than comfort, more than hope. Resurrection is the Good News!

A Brief Look at Commonly Used Scriptures

At the point, let us examine a few of the scriptural passages that are most commonly used as the foundation for homilies and sermons on the occasion of death. Psalm 23, John 14:1-6, and Revelation 21:1-6 are by no means the exhaustive list of scripture that could be preached at a Christian funeral. .

PSALM 23

¹The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

²He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;

³he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.

⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

Subject : What is the psalmist's comfort in times of trial?

Complement : The grace and goodness of the love of God are the only comforts in times of trial.

Big Idea : We must trust in the Lord for comfort and provision in our times of trial.

The 23rd Psalm is one of the most beloved and easily recognized of the Psalter. It would almost seem odd for it be missing as a part of a Christian funeral

service. It has brought comfort to the faithful for centuries and speaks of an unshakeable trust in the Lord even in times of difficult circumstances.

“We value the twenty-third Psalm because it is personal” (Robinson 11).

Notice how the psalmist says, “my shepherd.” Ancient Israel often spoke about the Lord in terms of “our God,” so this unique distinction sets the psalm apart as deeply personal. “God demonstrates the same patient, tireless care of His people that a good shepherd shows for his flock” (Robinson 11). It is a psalm of trust and confidence. The confidence is in God’s goodness not only in this present life, but in the life to come. Indeed, God’s strength and grace is for all ages. “It causes us to hope in the glory God has prepared for his own” (Gaebelein 5: 214).

There are two parts to this psalm. The first part, verses 1-4, speaks of the Lord as a shepherd. A shepherd, as described in these verses, cares for, provides for, and protects the sheep.

The rod and the staff (v. 4) symbolize God’s care. In Exodus, chapter 4, Moses was very concerned about his mission from God to the Israelites. He said to God, “suppose they do not believe me or listen to me, but say, ‘The Lord did not appear to you.’” The Lord said to him, ‘what is that in your hand?’ He said, ‘a staff.’ And he said, ‘throw it on the ground.’ So he threw it on the ground, and it became a snake; and Moses drew back from it. Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Reach out your hand, and seize it by the tail – so he reached out his hand and grasped it, and it became a staff in his hand – ‘so that they may believe the Lord, the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham. The God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you.’” God used the staff to symbolize His personal presence and

protection of Moses and to signify to the people that Moses could be trusted as God's chosen leader. Likewise, the rod and the staff in the Psalm are a reflection of God's personal presence and involvement in our lives.

The imagery of a shepherd is a testimony to the deep confidence that we have in God's loyalty. A shepherd never leaves his sheep. He provides for them (i.e. a place to eat and a place to rest). He protects them, a thought echoed in the "host" motif that comprises the second portion of this psalm.

In verse 5, the Lord transitions from a shepherd into the host of a banquet. This is not a simple party, but the very best of what God has for those whom He loves. The overflowing cup represents the generosity of God and reiterates the same provision and care that is established in previous verses. "His is 'the cup of salvation'" (Gaebelein 5: 218).

The word, "forever," in verse 6 is a reminder that God's love and presence is with us always. God's care comes once again in provision, abundance, and protection. Throughout this passage we see God's loyalty and unwavering faithfulness to us on a very personal level. We can trust in God to be our strength even in the most difficult of times.

JOHN 14:1-6

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going." ⁵Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" ⁶Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Subject : Why should we trust in Jesus as our only hope for eternal salvation?

Complement : We should trust in Jesus because he is the way, the truth, the life, and the only access point to God.

Big Idea : Those who trust in Jesus as their Lord and Savior will have a path to follow that leads them to the house of the Lord for eternity.

This passage can be preached using several different pericopes : 13:36-14:4, 14:5-7, or, as in this case, a combination of both 14:1-6. Regardless, Jesus is addressing his disciples and is being questioned by both Peter and Thomas as to the future. Jesus knows that he is going to die and takes this opportunity to begin preparing the disciples for what lies ahead of them.

The whole purpose of this conversation is to encourage the disciples to continue on in faith. Jesus knew what was going to happen and he wanted to give the disciples some specific directions and information that would sustain them after his death.

“Jesus never speculated about a future life; he spoke as one who was as familiar with eternity as one is with his hometown” (Gaebelin 9: 142).

The instructions that he leaves the disciples start with the directive “do not let your hearts be troubled.” There is no need for the disciples to worry or to be scared about what lies ahead of them. They are told to believe in God and to believe in Jesus. Do not overlook this statement on the way to verse 6. Believing in God, Jesus Christ, is the key to salvation.

It makes sense then that when Thomas asks, “how can we know the way?” (v. 5b), Jesus says, “I am the way” (v. 6). Those who believe in Jesus Christ and follow him as their Lord and Savior hold the directions that will lead them to eternal salvation. Jesus wasn’t saying that he knew the directions, he was saying that he is

the only direction. Jesus took for granted the belief of his disciples and that is why he was able to say that if he went to prepare a place for them, he would come back, take them with him, and that where he was, they would also be.

I have encountered colleagues who are very nervous about including verse 6b, “No one comes to the Father except through me,” in funeral homilies. They are concerned that they might offend someone. I would argue that this pericope, regardless of where it starts and ends, is not complete without 6b. “He [Jesus] is the way to the Father because only he has an intimate knowledge of God unmarred by sin. He is the truth because he has the perfect power of making life one coherent experience irrespective of its ups and downs. He is the life because he was not subject to death, but made it subject to him” (Gaebelin 9: 144). For these reasons, Jesus is the only way to reach the Father. This is the theological premise for Jesus being the only mediator for us to God, since he is the only revelation of God to humanity.

Ultimately this passage is so comforting to the bereaved because it speaks to the continuity of life, the promise of eternity for those who believe.

REVELATION 21:1-6

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” ⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

⁶Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

Subject : What will the future hold for those who believe in God?

Complement : The future for those who believe in God will be the creation of a new heaven and earth where sin and corruption no longer exist.

Big Idea : For those who live and die in the Lord, there is coming a day when all things will be made new and the pain of this life will be gone forever.

This is the revelation of what will ultimately come in the New Jerusalem.

This is important because this scripture speaks to the “long term,” and those who mourn need to know that there is coming a day when the sadness that they feel on the day of a funeral will no longer exist.

This new day, new heaven, new earth, is the seventh “last thing” revealed in Revelation. “From the smoke and pain and heat [of the preceding scenes] it is a relief to pass into the clear, clean atmosphere of the eternal morning where the breath of heaven is sweet and the vast city of God sparkles like a diamond in the radiance of his presence” (Gaebelin 5:477).

These verses illuminate for us what the heavenly city will look like. There will be a restoration and things will be made new, pristine, again. “John’s vision is one of eschatological promise, future in its realization, totally dependent on God’s power to create it, yet having present implications for the life of the church in this age” (Gaebelin 12:592). There is a reason to hope because scripture speaks to us of the future and that future looks beautiful.

Since we believe that God is with us, we know that God’s work in salvation history continues towards a complete reversal from sin and corruption to a world and

lives made new and whole again. Death and sin are conquered and life is restored in the fullness of the glory of God.

Although many who preach this text on the occasion of death have a tendency to focus on verse 4, the catalyst for this new world is revealed in verse 3 where the loud voice says, “now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people. And God himself will be with them and be their God.” It is God dwelling with humanity, living together, that makes a new heaven and a new earth. That is the day that believers are promised in life and the day that we hope for in death.

Suggestions for Further Reading

“Confessions of 1967.” The Book of Confessions. Louisville: Office of the General Assembly PC(USA), 2004. 254, 262.

“Heidelberg Catechism.” The Book of Confessions. Louisville: Office of the General Assembly PC(USA), 2004. 29, 34-35, 43.

“The Larger Catechism.” The Book of Confessions. Louisville: Office of the General Assembly PC(USA), 2004. 197-202, 207-208, 223-224.

Leith, John H. Basic Christian Doctrine. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, Chapter 22, “The Christian Hope.”

Leith, John H. Reformed Imperative: What the Church Has to Say That No One Else Can Say. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988, Chapter 6, “A New Heaven and a New Earth.”

Migliore, Daniel L. Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1991, Chapter 12, “Christian Hope.”

“Scots Confession.” The Book of Confessions. Louisville: Office of the General Assembly PC(USA), 2004. 11-14, 19.

“Second Helvetic Confession.” The Book of Confessions. Louisville: Office of the General Assembly PC(USA), 2004. 62-63, 111-112.

“Shorter Catechism.” The Book of Confessions. Louisville: Office of the General Assembly PC(USA), 2004. 176-178, 184.

“Westminster Confession of Faith.” The Book of Confessions. Louisville: Office of the General Assembly PC(USA), 2004. 128-130, 134-136, 142-143, 153-159.

CHAPTER THREE

History of Funerals, Literature Review, Practical Suggestions

Although, as you will see in chapter four, every preacher approaches funeral sermons/homilies differently, there are some basic practical issues to be aware of when one approaches this aspect of ministry. In this chapter we will discuss and examine: a simple history of funerals and funeral sermons, the broad scope of literature available concerning death and dying, funerals, and preaching, general pastoral suggestions from a variety of pastors, and the application of Dr. Haddon Robinson's stages of expository preaching might be applied to preaching at funerals.

The Evolution of Funeral Sermons/Homilies

Regardless of denomination, theological training and education, or geography, funerals are part of ministry for pastors. It may even come as a surprise that nowhere in the Bible does it tell pastors to bury the dead. Yet, funeral "speeches" date back to biblical times. "David's eulogy over Saul and Jonathan is perhaps the most famous (2 Sam. 1:19-27)" (Gibson 44).

It is important, however, for a preacher to understand the difference between a eulogy and a funeral sermon. "A eulogy means 'good words' and the eulogy focuses on the life of the person who has died" (Gibson 49). A sermon, on the other hand, has a clear focus on witnessing to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The reason this difference is so important stems from the idea that a eulogy has the capacity to be entirely secular in nature, focused on the life of the individual, not on the death, resurrection, and hope of Jesus Christ. This is not to say that there is not a place in a

funeral service to remember a loved one, but it should never become the exclusive focal point.

“The Greek eulogy has many hundreds of years of tradition behind it, coming from the literary genre known as the encomium, which was one type of funeral observance” (Gibson 44). An encomium is defined as “a formal expression of high praise; eulogy” (“Encomium”). The alternative at that time might have been a treatise on grief, often in the form of a letter. Originally, “the Greek funeral speech grew out of the commemoration of soldiers who had died in battle for their country” (McGuire qtd. in Gibson 45).

As the Christian funeral developed it was similar to the Greek encomium but included “consolation rooted in the doctrines of the Christian faith” (Gibson 45). “Preaching was part of funeral worship in the early church. When the Edict of Toleration (A.D. 325) was issued, a liturgy in a public worship building either preceded or followed the procession to the grave” (Gibson 46).

From the time of the early church until the Reformation (around 1520), the Roman Catholic traditions of liturgy and ritual became the norm in Christian worship. Accordingly, as the liturgy became more ritualized, there was less emphasis on the funeral sermon itself. Once the Reformation began, “the point of the funeral shifted from assisting the deceased in their passage to heaven and became instead an object lesson for the living” (Walter qtd. in Gibson 46).

“First-generation seventeenth-century American Puritans did not allow funeral sermons on the day of the burial. However, it soon became customary to give them on the Sunday after the funeral. Later in the century the sermon was given on the

evening of the funeral” (Gibson 47). As the eighteenth-century emerged, the American Puritans started to embrace the more elaborate funerals of their contemporaries in Britain.

By the dawn of the nineteenth-century, funeral sermons were beginning to become more commonplace. “Sermon length typically was forty-five minutes to an hour or more” (Gibson 48). That trend seems to have diminished in the earlier part of the twentieth-century. In a conversation with Dr. Charles Campbell, the Peter Marshall Professor of Homiletics at Columbia Theological Seminary, in Decatur, GA, Campbell said, “if you were to look back in earlier versions of the Book of Common Worship, even as recently as twenty or thirty years ago, there really was no focus on a funeral sermon or homily by Presbyterians. When I served in the parish, we just didn’t do that kind of thing.” (Campbell).

Funeral practices are constantly changing. The choices that families can make now include: graveside services, memorial services, funeral services, in a funeral home, in a church, in a reception hall, etc. “Most Christian services have a scripturally based funeral sermon as part of the liturgy, while others eulogize the deceased by reading poems, memorabilia, and reminiscences” (Gibson 48).

As modern preachers approach the task of preaching on the occasion of death, we are going to be challenged to speak faithfully, biblically, and relevantly to a culture that is moving at a rapid speed, with little time to consider death, and even less time to consider life in Christ.

Literature Review

One cannot even approach this type of study without encountering Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's book on death and dying. On Death and Dying : What the dying have to teach doctors, nurses, clergy, and their own families. This thoughtful, yet honest, look at death and dying that comes from countless interviews with actual people faced with the prospect of death. This book is an excellent resource for pastors, doctors, social workers, and families. Although not necessarily theological in nature, it brings to the forefront many of the issues with which the dying struggle and to which the living will eventually need to respond.

In addition to Kubler-Ross, Dr. Stanley Nuland, a medical doctor and professor at Yale, wrote How We Die : Reflections on Life's Final Chapter. This book is critically important for pastors and others who are not medically trained to be able to understand what is happening physically, and sometimes mentally, to their parishioners in the final stages of their lives. Nuland brings a secular perspective to the dying process. However, he also occasionally illustrates why so many of the dying lose their faith.

Lynne Ann DeSpelder and Albert Lee Strickland went to great lengths to cull information regarding death and dying from the humanities, theology, history, medicine, and business and created a unique resource entitled, The Last Dance : Encountering Death and Dying. This book speaks to medical, theological, social, and cultural issues that all present themselves during times of death and dying.

From a theological perspective, one of greatest offerings available to pastors comes from C.S. Lewis. In A Grief Observed, Lewis does nothing more than relate

his own personal experience of the death of his wife, the suffering that they went through, and his journey back to a relationship with God. Lewis is widely regarded a Christian literary icon, but in this book, he presents himself humbly as a grieving widower wrestling with God on his journey back to faith.

Walter Kaiser, former president of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary contributes to the discussion of suffering, as seen through a biblical lens, in Grief and Pain in the Plan of God. Kaiser carefully exegetes the book of Lamentations to examine both corporate and personal pain and suffering. The advantage of this book for a preacher is that it helps one to examine the corporate nature of loss and suffering and provides a strong foundation for a pastor that must respond to a “mass incident” such as 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina.

Along those same lines, Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar presents The Threat of Life : Sermons on Pain, Power, and Weakness that offers a scholarly tempered approach to the practice of preaching on the broader theological concepts of pain and suffering.

There are also several scholars who have taken rather serious looks at the practical issues of funerals themselves as well as the elements or components that comprise a funeral sermon or homily. The oldest of these comes from Andrew Blackwood who published The Funeral : A Source Book for Ministers in 1942 that is still referenced by modern scholars. Scott Gibson, who is also careful to include a detailed history of the funeral sermon, devotes an entire chapter to funerals in his work entitled Preaching for Special Services. Gibson has compiled much of the

research regarding the evolution of funerals and funeral sermons. He also gives additional resources for further in-depth research.

Calvin Ratz, Mark Coppenger, and Roger Miller have three chapters about the challenges and consideration of funerals in Weddings, Funerals, and Special Events : The Personal Ministry of Public Occasions. Although much of the work revolves around the practice of meeting with the family, diffusing family tension, and handling the mundane details, there are a few sections on specifically on communicating the Gospel. There is also a chapter on handling difficult situations such as suicide, still-borns, and automobile accidents.

Several modern scholars and preachers present guides and suggestions for funeral services and sermons that include Dan Lloyd's Leading Today's Funerals and John Mansell's The Funeral.

Lloyd's book focuses on the presentation of the Gospel in the midst of grief. It includes several appendices that are templates for : pastoral care, funeral planning, leading worship, funeral services for men, funeral services for women, a general funeral service, and a committal.

Mansell's focus is more logistical in nature. He presents guidelines for working with families, improving bereavement ministries within a congregation, and working with funeral homes. He also includes a funeral planning guide as an appendix.

Tom Long, perhaps the most familiar name to Presbyterian scholars, has written several articles in the Journal for Preachers that deal with the changing views that society has in regard to funerals as well as some basic approaches to preaching

the truth of the gospel in a funeral service. He is cited often in other works and is in the process of publishing a new resource book for pastors and scholars on funerals and funeral sermons.

One of the few texts available on funeral homilies that comes from a woman's perspective is The Life of Christ and the Death of a Loved One : Crafting the Funeral Homily by Barbara Schmitz. Schmitz presents her views on funeral sermons through the lens of the liturgical year. She demonstrates how one might approach a funeral based on the seasons of the Christian church, incorporating such themes as advent, lent, epiphany, and Pentecost. She also includes sample sermons.

LeRoy Aden and Robert Hughes focus on those left behind and those still suffering in their book entitled Preaching God's Compassion : Comforting Those Who Suffer. Although the book encompasses all facets of suffering, there is an entire chapter devoted to "preaching to believers who experience loss" as well as samples of pastoral preaching at the end of the book. This book merges theology and homiletics to provide a solid foundation for a pastoral response to suffering.

Lest we forget that funeral services and particularly funeral sermons or homilies do not exist in a vacuum devoid of relationship with the rest of the homiletic world, a thoughtful preacher would be wise to consult basic homiletic texts such as Haddon Robinson's Biblical Preaching : The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages and Bryan Chapell's Christ-Centered Preaching : Redeeming the Expository Sermon as a foundational piece for a clearer understanding of the purpose of preaching.

Likewise, those in the reformed tradition stand to benefit from consulting works such as Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion to assist in developing a theological basis on which their sermon must stand. John Leith also addresses the theological issues of Christian hope in chapter 22, aptly named, "The Christian Hope," in his book Basic Christian Doctrine. Leith continues the discussion, along with an examination of God's consolation, in chapter 6, "A New Heaven and a New Earth," in Reformed Imperative : What the Church has to Say that No One Else Can Say.

Finally, one of the most noteworthy and thoughtful pieces of literature that contributes to the discussions of this project is a compilation piece edited by Michael Bush of Erskine Theological Seminary entitled The Incomplete One : Words Occasioned by the Death of a Young Person. Sermons from Karl Barth, John Claypool, William Sloane Coffin, Jr., and Friedrich Schleiermacher are presented, along with other modern preachers, that were given in response to the tragic loss of a young person and in some cases a family member.

General Observations Worth Considering

Every funeral is unique and every pastor is unique. As Dr. Stanley Nuland puts it, "every life is different from any that has gone before it and so is every death" (3). For that reason, a cookie-cutter approach to funeral sermons is almost impossible. However, preachers would be wise to remember that they are not the first to venture into the proclamation of the Gospel on such an occasion. With that in mind there are some general suggestions that can help novice and well-seasoned preachers avoid some common errors.

“No pastoral responsibility is more demanding than ministering comfort to people who are shocked and bereaved because of the death of a loved one” (Wiersbe qtd. in Gibson 43). “How we handle it [burying the dead] goes a long way in determining our acceptance in a community and the depth of our spiritual impact on a congregation” (Peterson 95). Make no mistake about it, there are no second chances to get a funeral right. More than on any other occasion preachers find themselves with a truly unique audience, often one that does not normally grace the pews. It may even be the case that the immediate family of the deceased are not even church members or believers. Preachers find themselves in the unique position of possibly confirming every negative stereotype that the secular world holds about the church or using this unique opportunity to speak the truth of the Gospel in a compassionate and comforting way to hurting friends and family.

“A funeral is, first and foremost, a service of praise and worship in thanksgiving to God for the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (Schmitz 18). “The dominant theme of a funeral service has to be that Jesus Christ is alive. Christ’s death and resurrection supply meaning to our deaths. His resurrection provides a stream of grace that enables us to cope with grief” (Peterson 100). There is a time and a place to share personal stories, to speak of the deceased, and to celebrate their life. But, these things come secondary to the proclamation of the Word that sets worship apart from a secular remembrance of a life departed. When it comes to preaching, Schmitz writes, “our task is not first to say something comforting (although that certainly is important) nor to give a eulogy, lauding the accomplishments of the deceased” (18).

If we are not careful we run the risk of finding ourselves unprepared and subject to falling into the “eulogy trap.” This trap is the result of a time crunch that finds us without enough Biblical preparation to share the Gospel in such a situation and the temptation to go the easier route of sharing stories of the life of the departed. “The challenges, the lack of good material, and time pressure are all what lead us to fall into giving the non-homily known as ‘the eulogy,’ where instead of preaching the Gospel, we use the homily time to give a recap of ‘this is your life’ on behalf of the deceased (usually supplied by the family, often a whitewash, and frequently lacking in anything overtly religious)” (Schmitz 15).

In a sermon message, one is wrestling often with the most painful and disturbing aspects of life. To take such a journey on a regular basis requires integrity, a disciplined openness to the work of the Spirit, and a deep yearning to answer and live out one’s calling to follow in the footsteps of Christ. When one enters into such reflection, one is forced to confront one’s own limits, deficits, and shortcomings. Often, it is much easier to take shortcuts and settle for the generic; however this is not the way of the Spirit (Mansell 35).

Exegetical preparation is something that can be done long before a death occurs. See chapter two for details. But, when death happens and it is important to remember that it could happen any minute, pastors need to respond quickly and efficiently not only to provide pastoral care but to get a mere glimpse of the audience to whom they will be sharing the Gospel with in the next several days. Although pastoral care is not the topic of this project, both Mansell and Lloyd offer a multitude of suggestions on how to approach this ministry. Preachers need to exercise specific caution in both care and proclamation not to make light of the suffering of a family. “One of the of the commonest ways to deal with another’s suffering is to make light of it, to gloss it over, to attempt shortcuts through it. Because it is so painful, we try

to get to the other side quickly” (Peterson qtd. in Kaiser 14). If we do not take seriously the suffering and grief of a family in an early encounter with them, we may lose their hearing of the Word at the funeral. If we make this mistake in the funeral itself, we run the risk of rendering the Gospel as nothing more than a superficial, jovial band-aid to a hurting family.

When preparing the sermon there are two things to keep in mind regarding your audience. First, no family wants public embarrassment. Be sure that if you are going to share a story, even one that relates to the Gospel, that it is a story the family is comfortable with sharing. Second, families do not want their grief compared to the grief of another family. Every life and every death are unique and so too is the grieving process. “Grief is a normal response to loss. All of us need to meaningfully work through personal trauma or disappointment” (Lloyd 16).

Finally, “it’s not at all unrealistic to hope the service will lead a good number of those attending into the presence of God. When this happens, lives are changed. Comfort, repentance, quickening can occur, or at least get underway” (Peterson 115).

Biblical Preaching on the Occasion of Death

In his book, Biblical Preaching : The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages, Dr. Haddon Robinson details ten stages that go into the preparation process of an expository sermon. “Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the

Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through the preacher, applies to the listeners” (Robinson 21).

The purpose of this section is to examine how one might apply these stages of preparation in the context of preparing a funeral sermon/homily. Normally, a preacher will not have the time usually available to them (for either preparation or preaching) that they would in the course of routine weekly preaching. In addition, funeral sermons/homilies are no longer the length of Sunday morning sermons.

“Funeral sermons should be brief. Ministers generally agree on an upper limit of ten to fifteen minutes” (Gibson 56). “A funeral message isn’t lengthy, but it should be long enough to provide substance for faith to grasp” (Ratz qtd. in Gibson 56).

STAGE 1 : CHOOSE THE PASSAGE TO BE PREACHED

This first stage would be one of the easiest places for diligent preachers to save themselves quite a bit of time. Most denominations have worship books that suggest a wide variety of generally accepted scriptures that appropriately speaks to the issues surrounding death. Common examples of widely used scriptures include : John 14: 1-7, John 11 (verses 25 and 26 being the focal text), Revelation 21:1-7, 1 Corinthians 15:51-58, and Psalm 23. For the benefit of the reader, an extensive list of potential scriptures will be included as Appendix A.

Certainly one should not feel “locked in” to the common scriptures. There may be a favorite passage of the deceased that speaks a relevant, Biblical truth. It may be that there is a passage that the life of the deceased exemplified and is worthy of discussion. However, when choosing a text be careful not to choose one that is so

obscure that the majority of preaching time would be consumed with just trying to explain the text itself.

Regardless of the text that is chosen, the selected passages should be based on the natural literary divisions of the material. For example, Psalm 23 is a complete literary unit in and of itself. To that end, one should “base the sermon on a literary unit of biblical thought” (Robinson 55).

STAGE 2 : STUDY YOUR PASSAGE AND GATHER YOUR NOTES

Funeral sermons are often preached within a few days from the time of death. This timeline does not offer the luxury of additional study that is possible during the normal course of weekly preaching. Therefore, in most funeral preaching situations, it would benefit the preacher to have done this study ahead of time. New preachers would be wise to have done a thorough study on three of four of the more common funeral texts in advance of their first funeral because while funeral situations are unique from funeral to funeral, the Word of the Lord stands eternal. Of course, if the preachers chooses a text unique to a given death, additional study may be required.

Regardless of when pastors study the text, they should always study the text itself first. Commentaries are a wonderful tool, but the work of the Holy Spirit in the life and experience of preachers as they encounter the text is not to be underestimated. The challenge for preachers in this stage is to not only see the broader context of the passage, but also see how it relates to its immediate context.

STAGE 3 : AS YOU STUDY THE PASSAGE, RELATE THE PARTS TO EACH OTHER TO DETERMINE THE EXEGETICAL IDEA AND ITS DEVELOPMENT.

In this stage preachers will want to determine what exactly the biblical writer is talking about and what the writer's thesis statement (subject) might be. When narrowing in on a subject it is important to consider if the subject fits into all the parts of the passage. If it is too broad, what might be done to narrow it? Ultimately the question becomes, "is your subject an exact description of what the passage is talking about" (Robinson 66)? A subject can always be stated in the form of a question.

Once there is clarity about the subject, a complement must be identified. By definition, a complement completes the subject. In the case of a subject that is presented as a question, the complement would be a complete sentence that answers that specific question.

STAGE 4: SUBMIT YOUR EXEGETICAL IDEA TO THREE DEVELOPMENTAL QUESTIONS

Once a declarative statement is made we can restate it, explain it, prove it, or apply it.

Explaining is basically determining what the statement means.

Proving it asks the question, "is it true?" Does the logic of experience support the statement? "A statement is not true because it is in the Bible; it is in the Bible because it is true" (Robinson 82). If we cannot find the truth in the statement and we fail to answer the question, we will find ourselves speaking only to those who are already committed to the faith.

Finally, we must apply it. What difference does the statement make? “We cannot determine what a passage means to us until we figure out what the passage meant when it was written” (Robinson 87).

A funeral sermon presents a very special challenge in this stage. How does a pastor “prove” the departed’s resurrection? The truth of the matter is that there is no proof. The empty tomb is the proof of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, but as it stands right now, we do not walk through empty graveyards with wide-open tombs where the faithful have been resurrected. So, the truth that must be preached on the occasion of a funeral is the truth of the *promise* of the resurrection for those who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This is a truth that we see repeated over and over again in scripture, not only in the passage in John 14 where Jesus promises us his return and that on day we will be with him, but also on that hill in Calvary when Jesus was on the cross, promising even the thief who believed in him that he would see him in paradise.

STAGE 5: IN LIGHT OF THE AUDIENCE’S KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE, THINK THROUGH YOUR EXEGETICAL IDEA AND STATE IT IN THE MOST EXACT, MEMORABLE SENTENCE POSSIBLE.

This stage is crucial when preaching at a funeral. A pastor simply has very few ways of knowing whether the sermon will be preached to an audience of dedicated, faithful believers, an audience of confirmed atheists, or most likely, an awkward balance of both. The reality is that a funeral sermon must be extremely basic, and convey the fundamental truth of the passage to be presented.

The passage in Revelation 21 (see chapter 2 for complete discussion) is a good example of a very basic statement that can be talked about in a short period of

time during the course of a funeral. It's big idea is: for those who live and die in the Lord, there is coming a day when all things will be made new and the pain of this life will be gone forever.

No doubt there is a great deal of theology and exegesis behind such a statement. But, when a pastor has only a few moments to speak to a grieving community, a statement such as this quickly conveys hope and a promise for the future.

STAGE 6: DETERMINE THE PURPOSE FOR THIS SERMON.

As previously stated, "A funeral is, first and foremost, a service of praise and worship in thanksgiving to God for the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (Schmitz 18). So the purpose of a funeral sermon is to give witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It would be fantastic if the purpose could include comfort and consolation for the family, to lift up the life of the deceased, and to convert new believers.

However, that is a great deal to accomplish in less than fifteen minutes. A funeral sermon needs to be focused on the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the hope that we have of overcoming death, and the promise of Christ's triumphal return. Or as Scott Gibson writes, "the *main* purpose is to bring the hope of the Gospel to loved ones facing the pain of death" (Chapell qtd. in Gibson 54).

Robinson suggests that one should be able to put into words what should result from your preaching. In the case of a funeral, regardless of scripture or circumstances surrounding the death, the ultimate purpose is to give thanks and praise for the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

STAGE 7: THINKING ABOUT YOUR HOMILETICAL IDEA, ASK YOURSELF HOW THIS IDEA SHOULD BE HANDLED TO ACCOMPLISH YOUR PURPOSE.

Sermons can be developed in three major ways : deductively, semi-inductively, or inductively. Although all three ways have great value in preaching and add a variety to the possible presentations of the scripture, the most effective way to approach a funeral sermon given the time restraints both in preparation and presentation and in the unpredictability of the audience, would be to offer the sermon deductively.

Deductive sermons take three forms : an idea to be explained, a proposition to be proved, or a principle to be applied. The most common forms of deductive sermon seen at funerals would be ones of explanation and application. Everyone gathered at a funeral service is well-aware of why they are in attendance. A preacher cannot explain away a death but can explain how those who are mourning can respond in faith to the loss of their loved one. “As people go through the valley, they can’t handle the abstractions of systematic theology but they can see the biblical images that reveal a caring and comforting Savior” (Wiersbe qtd. in Gibson 57). In short, keep it simple.

Time constraints and the emotional and physical availability of the congregation might limit the effectiveness of a semi-inductive or inductive sermon. These types of sermons almost demand an investment of active listening on the part of the congregation, something that might not be readily available from a family trying to cope with grief.

STAGE 8: HAVING DECIDED HOW THE IDEA MUST BE DEVELOPED TO ACCOMPLISH YOUR PURPOSE, OUTLINE THE SERMON.

Just because a funeral sermon/homily is short does not mean that it doesn't need to be well-focused. In fact, clarity in brevity is the key to a well-communicated funeral sermon. For that reason an outline is absolutely essential. It should be short with relatively few points and each point should be made in the form of a declarative sentence, not a question.

STAGE 9: FILL IN THE OUTLINE WITH SUPPORTING MATERIALS THAT EXPLAIN, PROVE, APPLY, OR AMPLIFY THE POINTS.

When it comes to funeral sermons this may prove to be the most difficult stage. Supporting materials for funerals are supplied by the life and interests of the departed as told through family and friends. It won't necessarily be a shortage of material that will pose a challenge, but the overabundance of material that could lead to a eulogy instead of a sermon.

The key to using supporting material wisely is that it fit nicely with the point of the declarative statement being preached. A fabulous story about Cousin John's annual fishing trip to Montana might be quite interesting and yet have nothing to do with God's role in our redemption. A wise preacher will listen carefully to the family when he/she meets with them following a death. They will take note of pictures on the wall, awards or certificates, family videos or scrapbooks. Although the wealth of information may at first appear overwhelming, it may end up that there are only one or two things that would actually be suitable supporting materials for a funeral sermon.

Again, we are to be reminded that a misplaced illustration, even if it supports a point beautifully, will be lost if it alienates or embarrasses the family in any way.

STAGE 10: PREPARE AN INTRODUCTION AND CONCLUSION TO THE SERMON.

Right away, this stage presents a new challenge for a funeral preacher. If the sermon/homily is only going to be ten to fifteen minutes, the introduction and conclusion must be adjusted accordingly.

“An effective introduction commands attention” (Robinson 166). It will uncover a need and reveal a purpose. Commanding attention at funerals is usually not a problem. The purpose of a funeral is pretty obvious. But, it is the need that is worthy of introduction. The “need” in a time of loss and grief is hope and comfort. Effectively, we can use this opportunity to once again introduce Jesus Christ.

The purpose of a conclusion is to conclude, to bring it all together, and not merely just to stop. This could be the time to link a story of how the departed’s life illustrated the previously mentioned biblical principle. It could be a favorite quote or a question, or a prayer. Regardless of how one concludes, the conclusion must remain consistent with the overall big idea of the passage.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Collection of Sermons Preached on the Occasion of Death

Introduction

The following pages contain twelve funeral sermons that have already been preached before a congregation. They are the efforts of eleven preachers of different denominations from all over the United States and Canada. Some of them subscribe to the expository method of preaching, many do not.

These preachers submitted the sermons not as a selection of their best work, but as real-life, real-time, funeral sermons that had to be given within a certain time frame and a given context. Many of them were submitted in their original, unedited form.

The purpose of this project is to examine a variety of approaches to preaching at funerals. As can be seen in the following sermons, there are some approaches that are significantly stronger and more powerful than others. The preachers themselves are not “celebrity” preachers. They are not nationally or internationally known for their preaching. Instead, they represent the thousands of faithful preachers who care for their flocks with a commitment and love for their Lord and Savior. These “common shepherds” were selected because this project is for the benefit of all the “common shepherds” who are tasked with the responsibility of extending a word of hope to those in the darkest moments of grief.

Each sermon is followed by a brief overview and commentary from the author of this project. These commentaries are in no way meant to belittle the efforts of the

preachers who submitted the sermons. Instead, they are written in a constructive way with suggestions to strengthen the presentation of the sermon. Clearly one does not deliver a funeral sermon twice. The goal is not to improve what has already been proclaimed, but to provide discussion for how future proclamation might be enhanced.

The sermons are the result of a variety of causes of death. The choice of the sermons was intentional because pastors will find that every funeral is different and that over the course of ministry they may be faced with preaching at a funeral that was precipitated by an unusual death. The hope is that by being able to see how colleagues have approached these delicate sermons, future preachers may be able to approach them with greater confidence.

Following each overview and commentary is an interview with the preacher. Many of the questions are generic to give readers a general sense of how preachers approach funeral sermons. However, most sermons have questions that are specific to their given sermon. These questions are to address some of the complex issues that accompany certain types of funeral sermons and the situations that cause them.

Sermon on the Occasion of Accidental Death

“When parents die, they take with them a large portion of the past. But, when children die, they take away the future as well” (Coffin qtd. in Bush 58). In this extraordinarily unique sermon, Rev. Tracee Hackel, associate pastor at the Chapel By the Lake in Juneau, Alaska, preaches on the occasion of the tragic death of both a father and a son.

Rick was a beloved teacher and sports coach at school in the small native village of Kake, Alaska. He and his teenage son, Gery, as well as a family friend, died on a hunting trip when their skiff overturned in some severe weather. When people go deer hunting in Alaska they take a boat to some of the islands where the deer come down to the shoreline to eat the grass that grows before the tree line. They load the deer in the boat and haul it off before the bears can smell anything. This is what Rick, Gery, and David were doing when they died.

Although Rick and his son were not Native people, Rick was adopted into the tribe and the family was very well loved. This was a huge loss for the community in Juneau and so this service was held for those who could not go to Kake. As you will see in the interview, Rev. Hackel faced some unique challenges as she presented the Gospel to a predominately Native American audience.

An additional challenge for Hackel was that she did not personally know the deceased, nor did she know the overwhelming majority of those who attended the service. As reflected in her interview, she had very little time to prepare for this sermon. Yet, she was diligent in her analysis of her audience and went to great length to present the Gospel in a way that did not threaten the ethnic culture of her

congregation. This sensitivity allowed her to share the truth of scripture so that it could be heard by the people in the pews.

Hackel starts off by acknowledging that these untimely deaths are not the way that humans anticipate them to be. She is quick to state that, “we were made for life, a life that reflected the glory of God to all those around us.” From there she goes directly into how our sin separates us from God. It is in this paragraph that Hackel comes very close to speaking of the will of God but appears to avoid the conversation at the last minute.

Since we do not know the particular audience, it is hard to determine if such a conversation would have been appropriate at that time. However, from a homiletic standpoint it would appear that she was developing one thought process and diverged from that process at the last second to change her big idea to something else.

As she relates the Adam and Eve story, she creates a point of impact with her mostly Tlingit audience. She demonstrates how their tribal understandings run parallel with the creation story. Once Hackel explains how humanity got into such a position, she ushers in the hope that is to be found in Jesus Christ. In paragraph four, Hackel almost completely shares the Gospel.

She then goes on to her primary passage of 1st Corinthians. She uses Jesus as the transition to this passage as she said, “it is on the account of Jesus Christ that the Apostle Paul wrote the letter of 1 Corinthians.” Had this been an expository sermon this would have been a very hard transition to make and would have created a disconnect between thoughts if it was presented in its current form.

Hackel then goes on to demonstrate how the lives of the deceased intersect with the virtues of love : tough, long-suffering, and sacrificial. Although this would have been an opportunity to connect these traits to Christ who was the transitional attribute of this paragraph, she lets the words fall flat.

At this point Hackel does something that has the potential to be very distracting. She introduces yet another scripture verse. As you read her sermon you can see that she uses specific words to connect all of the pieces together, in this case, “love.”

Hackel’s last two paragraphs attempt to provide directives and instruction for those who are mourning. She expresses the finality of what has happened here on earth but encourages the hope of what could be for those who believe in Christ. Her attention, however, is clearly focused on the immediate future as she speaks of the need to continue functioning as the body of Christ even though it appears that part of the body is missing.

The circumstances surrounding this sermon were challenging. Hackel was faced with the loss of three men she did not know, a congregation with which she was completely unfamiliar, a culture that she had not been received into at that time, and a time constraint that would be pressing even for the most seasoned of preachers. Hackel reflects that the ultimate purpose of a funeral sermon “is to point to Jesus Christ and his victory over death in the resurrection.” In this case she says that her big idea was, “that even the death of these influential and important people in the community is no reason to despair, because Jesus Christ conquered death, and has given us the power to live in faith, hope, and love, as they did.”

In reflecting on this sermon, please be sure to look at Question #18 in the interview section. Hackel admits that if given a second chance she'd like to make a stronger presentation for the resurrection and to have a stronger clarity about the overall message of the sermon. This is a case where an expository approach would have helped the preacher to be clear in her own mind what she wanted to say and then to be able to say it with clarity to those in the congregation.

The challenge of expository preaching at funerals is timing. Hackel had one day to prepare and chose a passage that is not a "standard" funeral passage. She would have been very pressed to be able to follow the stages of Biblical preaching in chapter 3 of this project in a 24-hour time span.

That being said, clearly she opened the door for further discussion with at least one of her congregation members as reflected in question 19 in the interview.

Rick, David, & Gery

Rev. Tracee Hackel

1 Corinthians 13

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-13

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹²For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

This is not the way it is supposed to be. Promising young men are not supposed to die when they go out together for a hunting trip. They are supposed to come home wet and tired with enough stories of their heroic exploits to make people laugh until the next hunt provides them with a new batch, and if the hunt has been good, enough meat for their families and their Elders—but even if they were dry and rested, had no stories, and no meat—they are supposed to come home.

This tragedy that has struck the Kake Community with the untimely deaths of Rick and David and Gery reminds us all that this is not the way it is supposed to be.

Not saying that God doesn't know what He's doing or that there is no meaning or reason to be found in suffering and death, what I am saying is that we were not created for death. The God of the universe formed human beings from the dust and breathed his own breath into us—we were made for life, a life that reflected

the glory of God to all those around us. But instead we chose the path of sin and death. In his book: “Homelands: Kayaking the Inside Passage” Byron Ricks tells about how he and his wife Maren met Rick and Glenn Wilson and ended up staying in Kake on their journey. He records a conversation with Rick in which Rick explains the Tlingit basis for respect. The understanding was that conversations did not take place between individuals alone, but when a member of one clan was speaking to the other it was understood that each individual spoke for his or her whole clan. They went out of their way to be respectful because any insult would not involve just the two individuals in a dispute but could be cause for a war between two clans. In a similar way Adam and Eve spoke for the whole human race when they chose to disobey God and so in effect declared war on Him, and death entered our world. The human race was made for life, death was not the way it was supposed to be. That is why we grieve - death goes against our created purpose—to live for God’s glory.

But we do not grieve as people without hope. God did not let us self-destruct—he loved us and selflessly gave his Son Jesus Christ to save us. Jesus, because he was fully God—spoke for God and because he was also fully human he spoke for the whole human clan—his perfect moral obedience, death on the cross and resurrection from the dead made peace between God and human beings—and because he represented the whole clan anyone who is in Christ- who trusts Jesus Christ and his work for their salvation—has peace with God.

It is on account of Jesus Christ that the Apostle Paul, who wrote the letter of 1 Corinthians, can write, even in the middle of a world plagued by sin and death, of the most excellent way—the way of love. It is in loving in a patient, kind, secure, humble, respectful, self-less, gentle, forgiving, evil rejecting, truth cheering, protecting, trusting, hoping, persevering way that we most nearly approach the way it is supposed to be in our fallen world. I am sure it does not surprise any of you that you recognize many of these traits as characteristics of the loved ones you have lost. Insofar as each of them exhibited these characteristics, they each understood the truth about love—the truth that it is not a warm fuzzy feeling, it is an action—it is a tough, long suffering, sacrificing way of life—the most excellent way.

The Song of Song or Song of Solomon in the Old Testament is all about love—one big love poem of sorts and right towards the end are these phrases: “...love is as strong as death, passion as fierce as the grave.” And “Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.”

Much of what you remember of Rick, David and Gery has to do with the love they showed, lived out among you. They are going to be very sorely missed in the community of Kake and many other places. They cannot be replaced—but neither can many waters quench the love they gave to the families, friends, and so many others who happened across their paths.

It is no accident that Paul's great chapter on love comes right after his explanation of the Church as one body—where some are eyes and some are ears and some are hands and some are feet—we each have different gifts and talents and eyes can't be ears and hands can't be feet. No one can ever be what Gery was, No one can ever be what David was, no one can ever be what Rick was, but just like a human body that has lost its sight or an arm or leg—the other parts fill in where they can. We never stop missing the part that's gone—this is not the way it is supposed to be. But because of Jesus Christ we do not have to despair—faith gives birth to hope—we are not the same, but we are not defeated either—we know that there is life beyond death.

Rick and David and Gery will be missed and no one can be exactly who they were, but the work of love does not have to disappear from Kake or from among those of you here in Juneau because they are gone.

Interview with Rev. Tracee Hackel

1. What are the challenges that you faced by preaching to an audience with a significant cultural heritage and yet a firm Christian spiritual foundation?

The main challenge was to find a point of connection with the culture that reflected the gospel and spoke to the folks who attended—especially since I did not know the family or the person and was preaching to a group of people of whom only one or two I would have any ongoing pastoral contact with—providentially someone I had been at Seminary with knew Rick and his family very well since he had been the Lay Pastor in Kake before coming to seminary. Glenn heard I was doing the service and forwarded me the chapter of the book that gave me the link with Rick and the Culture and the Gospel—as I think about it now—years later—it is amazing to me how that all came together—also, one of the primary reasons I got to know Glenn and his family in Seminary is that my roommate that year was a Tlingit Indian woman who I had met up North in Wasilla at the church I served on my Seminary Internship and who had come back to school with me to begin her studies—all these Alaskan connections. I suppose part of the challenge in ministering in any Native American environment is that you have a range of responses to incorporating the culture with the Christian message within the Native community itself—some of them were brought up to believe that their culture and Christianity were incompatible—others, usually younger ones are fighting to reclaim their culture and it is very important to have the cultural aspect represented—many of them see the Church as the primary culprits in squelching the culture—and to some extent they are right. There are also Native people who have become Christian who were not taught to reject their culture, but who do because they believe it is an alternate spirituality that cannot mesh with being a Christian. What I have observed is that some of the Tlingit culture is definitely off-limits—there is an active practice of witchcraft and worship of idol images that does go on—but many of the people will tell you that is not “culture” that is people messing with things they should not mess with and doing it in the name of the “culture” to make it “o.k.” As in other Native American spiritualities there was the practice of Shamanism and witchcraft, but not all Shamans were “bad” is what I have been told—in fact some of them were “good” Shamans who were able to heal and who prepared the people to receive the gospel—gave prophecies about the missionaries who would come and told the people to follow them and were some of the first converts to Christianity. Some Native people believe that many of their beliefs and stories were a sort of “pre-gospel” and that we shouldn’t be surprised to find the connections. My limited experience has been that people, like the girl who made the comment to me after the service, have not heard someone make those connections and are surprised, but not upset at them—I am always a little nervous about doing this, because it is always possible that I did not understand the custom or the story I am referencing and will say something in church that will be offensive—I am getting more comfortable with it the more I learn. In the

case with the Mills' service, I had this story written down and it was his words so I was sure that was the case. Well, that's a long explanation, and a bit rambling—but the relationship of Native American culture and Christianity is a challenging one because there are so many different ideas about what is “o.k.” and what is very definitely “not o.k.” and the culture is so tied up with their spirituality. For another example, last year I was adopted into the Raven Beaver clan in Angoon—there are some members of our presbytery that think my allowing myself to be adopted and given a Tlingit name put me under a kind of “spiritual power” that is not Christian—a kind of animal/ancestor spiritual thing—since all Tlingit names come from someone else—I have one of the names of my friend's mother—in the Tlingit world of family relations I am now her mother, and by virtue of my name I am also now a Great Grandmother at the ripe old age of 38! This is part of what makes keeping family connections straight so tough with my Tlingit friends—since one of my friends who is 18 is referred to as “grandma” by some of the kids. On the other hand, referring back to the thoughts about culture, most of the folks in my church and presbytery think that my adoption into the clan there is a big honor and, as I view it myself, a great sign of our oneness in Christ—that we are one family—this is how they culturally express it, by actually making me a family member. Now, that said, the friend who adopted me, when I asked her about the spirituality and what she believed, did indicate that there are parts of what goes on in the culture that as Christians they did not observe—she told me I would “know” what those were.

There are certain dances they do not do and there are certain ceremonies they do not observe. Well, as you can tell, I could go on and on about this—mostly because I am still learning. One thing I do know is that in Christ, there is no other power that can separate me from Him and I can go into this relationship without fear—so far it has meant giving a lot of “taxi” rides around Juneau for folks who come to town from the village, hanging around for all-night parties honoring folks who have died, and making a few “loans” and a lot of “gifts.” And it has meant having to learn and relate to a whole new family—for someone up here without any of my own family around it has been good to have one here—a real gift—the Lord really does set the lonely in families in funny ways!

2. Not including the time that you spend with the family, how long does it usually take for you to prepare your funeral messages?

Anywhere from 4-6 hours.

3. Given the unique circumstances surrounding the death that precipitated this message, how long did it take you to prepare?

I did spend a bit longer on this one, doing some extra research since I did not know the three or the community—so I would guess 8-10 hours of background reading and contacting folks outside the family—I actually did not talk with the family for this service if I remember right—that is unusual.

4. How does your preparation for funeral sermons/homilies differ from your Sunday morning preparations?

Funeral sermons are usually on much shorter notice. I try to find an aspect of the deceased's life or personality as a "contact point" for the Gospel message—whereas Sunday morning tends to use more general illustrations from a wide range of life and ages, backgrounds. The funeral sermon uses illustrations from one person's life and experience. I also keep in mind, that many people in attendance will not be familiar with church, the scriptures, or the Gospel and may even be 'hostile' to it and are there for the social or family responsibility only—while this may be true of some folks on Sunday morning it is not the majority like it may be at a funeral. A funeral sermon is much shorter than a Sunday morning one. While every Sunday sermon has as its goal to lift up Jesus Christ, a funeral sermon has the particular goal of lifting up the hope of the resurrection and eternal life in Jesus Christ.

5. What do you feel is an acceptable length for a funeral sermon/homily?

Depends on the location—i.e. indoors, outdoors; weather—i.e. pouring rain, snow, heat, cold; other elements of the service—i.e. how much music, how much other talking, etc. Anywhere between 3-10 minutes—I expect mine average about 5 minutes.

6. What determines the Biblical content of your funeral sermons and how do you develop that content?

I usually ask the family if they have any Scripture they want us to use in the service and then base the sermon on what they pick. On occasion they do not have any preference or any knowledge of the Bible and so I do one of two things—I either ask to see the Bible of the deceased, in cases where they were likely to have one, and I look for passages that are underlined or well worn pages to figure out if the deceased had any favorite or significant passages in their lives; or I listen to the family and learn as much about the deceased person as possible and I look for where their life and the need of the family intersects with Scripture that points clearly to the hope we have in Jesus Christ and use that.

7. Do you prefer to use standard scriptures (i.e. Psalm 23, John 14, etc.) as a pattern for your funeral sermons/homilies? Why or why not?

I prefer to use them if they fit. Some of the best Scriptures for funeral sermons have been those that one would not normally associate with a funeral, i.e. the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her hair for a woman who suffered from bi-polar disorder all her life and did things that embarrassed her family in public, or a passage from Lamentations about the siege of Jerusalem for a woman who had suffered for 10+ years with cancer, or a passage from Psalm 150 for a young man who was a talented trumpet player killed in a car crash. Many times people of an older generation find the recitation of Psalm 23 and hearing

John 14 comforting—to have those familiar words said and heard is important—since I do a lot of non-member funerals as the Associate Pastor—folks who did not grow up around those Scriptures do not request them—when I was a solo pastor in rural Kansas, Psalm 23 especially, was a standard. These “standard” texts have been great comfort throughout the generations and there is a reason for that—they are powerful texts which witness to the power of God over our last enemy—death—hearing them can be like receiving a long hug from a dear friend in the middle of your grief. At the same time I believe that all of Scripture points us to Christ and so to the power of his resurrection, and do enjoy the challenge of connecting the Word with the life of the deceased and the need of the congregation and the charge to witness to the resurrection.

8. How did you choose the scripture for this particular sermon?

I don’t remember exactly. Typically I ask the family if there is any Scripture they want me to use—many times they will have something in mind as they think about the person, and I usually let them pick. If the family does not suggest anything then usually some Scripture will come to mind as I am learning about a person, something their life reminds me of—and in that case I might use that Scripture. I seem to remember that this (1 Cor 13) was the Scripture that was used at the memorial service in Kake and so the friends and family in Juneau requested it—but I am not sure-- the Song of Songs verses though were something that kept coming to mind as I thought about the situation and the people themselves.

9. Do you repeat your exegesis each time you use reoccurring scriptures? Why or why not?

Since the time for exegesis in a funeral sermon situation is short I do an abbreviated exegesis even with re-occurring Scriptures, since each situation is new and each focus point different—some new insight the third time around, might be just the one needed for that situation. That said, I also try not to reinvent the wheel too much and because of limited time, I don’t spend a lot of time re-working a passage. Each sermon is different though, because each one incorporates something about each different life.

10. What do you perceive as the preacher's role in a funeral?

I understand the preacher’s role to proclaim not the virtues of the deceased, but the greatness of our God, and particularly His power over death through Jesus Christ and His offer of eternal life in Jesus Christ—in this way we bring comfort and hope to those who are grieving. We are to point people to where true comfort and hope can be found—only in Christ our Lord.

11. What would you say is the big idea of this particular sermon? "The take-home message?"

That even the death of these influential and important people in the community is no reason to despair, because Jesus Christ has conquered death, and given us the power to live in faith, hope, and love, as they did.

12. Should all funeral sermons/homilies have the same "big idea"? If so, what should that big idea be? If not, why?

The ultimate purpose of a funeral sermon is to point to Jesus Christ and His victory over death in the resurrection. On the one hand I would say 'yes': I do try to present the whole gospel in a funeral sermon—the problem of sin, our need for a Savior, and what Christ has done for us in defeating death and opening the door to eternal life. As far as a particular governing phrase or "picture", then my answer would be 'no' because in each sermon I do try to connect with some point of the deceased's life and would use that point of intersection with the gospel of grace as a sort of refrain or theme through the sermon—i.e. there was a fellow in the small town I pastored in Kansas who, in his senile years, rode around town on his riding lawnmower—with the blade down—and he did not follow any path—riding right across people's lawns, gardens, etc.—I used the idea of "leaving one's mark on the world" to talk about the significance of life, the mark that sin left on our world, the mark that Jesus left on the cross and in the empty tomb—cutting a great swathe through all our neat and tidy ideas about God, and about how we leave a mark on this world when we follow Jesus as this man had done throughout his life, etc. Or in another case where a man had been on a mission trip with us, when he died, the phrase that governed that brief sermon was "mission accomplished;" that a life lived for Christ was a mission right where we were and that the deceased's mission was accomplished; now we had a mission, etc.

13. You only mention the resurrection of Jesus once. Is that intentional?

Hmmm... good question. I doubt it was intentional in the sense that I said to myself—I should only mention the resurrection of Jesus once—but in the sense of carefully constructing the message-- I guess you could say it was intentional—that's just how it all came together. Now, I may mention the resurrection of Jesus only once in the sermon, but that is certainly not the only time it is mentioned in the service. I often use John 11:25-26 as the opening sentence of Scripture. The prayer of Invocation asks for the presence of the crucified and risen Lord to be there, the prayers of thanksgiving include thanks to God for raising Jesus Christ from the dead and offering us this same eternal life, the prayer of commendation and comfort again mentions the resurrection of Jesus and our own resurrection—so it gets mentioned many times, in many ways during the service.

14. Would you say that you use one sermon with modifications or unique sermons for each funeral?

Unique sermons for each funeral, though many of the same overarching concepts and ideas.

15. Is the structure of your funeral sermon/homily similar to your typical Sunday morning sermon? Why or why not?

No, mostly because it is shorter—that means not as much time for in-depth exegetical sections, and more emphasis on the application—i.e. how does this Scripture apply to this life and these grieving people and how does it show us the power of Christ over death?

16. Who do you consider to be your primary audience at a funeral?

God.

17. Do you use notes when you preach at funeral?

Yes—I use a manuscript—many times people will ask for a copy. I write out everything because I want to be sure to get all the names and quotes just right.

Sometimes if I run out of time I do make just notes, but I am sure to write down all names and dates and quotes, etc.

18. Having already preached this, if you had to do it a second time, would you change anything?

Yes, I always see plenty of places to improve sermons after I preach them—even before I preach them, but I run out of time and have to go with what I have got. I remember that this sermon was given on extremely short notice—I think I only had one day between the time they asked and the time of the service. I can see a lot in it I would like to change—funeral sermons are a challenge too because they have to be fairly short. I would probably like to make the introduction more smooth—spend a little more on the explanation of what I meant when I said, “it is not supposed to be this way” and how that fits with the sovereignty and providence of God. I would want to say something now, about heaven and what these three would be experiencing there. I would still want to challenge the people of the community to “fill in” and love one another, but I think I would like to tie that more strongly to the resurrection power of Christ than I did. I would want to more neatly tie in the basic explanation of the Fall and the curse of death and the substitutionary work of Christ with the rest of the message—the way it is almost seems like two sermons—which in a sense it is and goes back to the “what is the main point” question—I probably had two aims in mind—to present the basic gospel message of sin and redemption and to encourage the people to “fill in” for these stellar members of their community—to not give up hope of anyone or anything good ever being in Kake—village life

is tough in this respect, and people often give up on trying to love one another and contribute positively to their community because they get dragged down or put down or just despair—I would like to tie them together better and make sure they understood God’s grace and not be mistaken for a kind of “works righteousness” message of “now go home and do all this stuff to make Jesus happy”—I don’t think that’s what I said—it is certainly not what I meant, but I would like to make that more clear.

19. What kind of feedback (positive or negative) did you receive after this specific sermon?

The one comment I remember was from a young native woman who thanked me for using the analogy with the Tlingit culture to explain the Fall and the need for a Savior and said, “I had never heard it that way before!”

20. Is there anything that makes preaching at funerals unique from preaching on other occasions?

Yes, dealing with the life of the deceased and considering the congregation will most likely include a number of folks who are not believers, and considering the grief and distress of the family and close friends, and the clear goal to preach specifically on the power and hope offered in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Preaching for a funeral is different from preaching for other occasions. Though one could argue that it is not different, in the sense that the goal of every good sermon, at a funeral, wedding, or Sunday morning, is to display the glory of God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Sermon on the Occasion of Suicide

“Each year, some 30,000 Americans commit suicide, and most of them are young adults” (Nuland 158). Nuland suggests that as a result of the wide availability of firearms “the frequency of suicide, the most grievous face of violence, has doubled among children and adolescents in the past 30 years” (144).

As the rate of suicide increases, so do the chances that preachers will eventually be called upon to preach at a funeral for someone who has taken one’s own life. The theological challenges (i.e. is salvation possible for those who claim their own lives?) that are connected with suicide require each and every preacher to be able to stand on their own firm theological conviction on the issue before they preach a funeral sermon on such an occasion.

Rev. Dr. Robert Morris, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Jacksonville, Florida was forced to face the challenges when “Aiden,” a young father in his congregation, took his own life. When specifically asked if “Aiden was in heaven,” Morris immediately responded that, “I believe that Aiden is in heaven...he just temporarily lost his mind.” It is on this conviction that Morris went on to preach at Aiden’s funeral.

One of the most noticeable attributes of Morris’s sermon is that it is not based on one specific scripture. In fact, scripture is not even referenced in this sermon which Morris attributes to that fact that it had been presented prior to the sermon and he saw no need to repeat it. Instead this sermon is focused on the theological topic of grace.

In that respect it is very similar to David Bartlett's sermon for Erik Hansen in This Incomplete One : Words Occasioned by the Death of a Young Person. Bartlett preached, "my faith is this: that what we could not do, our God has done in Jesus Christ. That God has now held fast the deep, astonishing goodness of his dear child. And keeps him safe. Forever" (Bartlett qtd. in Bush 26).

Morris presents it this way : "that on that night last fall that he found Christ his Lord, what his heart was searching for...that Christ took hold of him that night...and has never let go. Even though there were some things that ate away at Aiden, the bond between Aiden and his Lord never broke."

Morris takes a unique approach to the presentation of this sermon in that he combines it with the classic definition of a eulogy. In fact two-thirds of the presentation are completely focused on either Morris or another friend or family member extolling the virtues of the deceased.

The sermon does not appear to have any discernable presentation of the Gospel message. However, Morris is very clear that the presentation of the Gospel was not his ultimate purpose. Instead he says it is, "to comfort and give hope to the grieving."

One of the ways that Morris goes about accomplishing his purpose is through the illustration of holding on to his sons' wrists as they cross a crowded parking lot. The idea being that no matter how they struggled, they could not get away. Likewise, no matter how much Aiden struggled in this earthly life, he could not escape the grip of God's grace. The scope could have been broadened then to suggest

that no matter how much we may struggle, as believers, we cannot escape God's grip of grace on our lives.

Ultimately, Morris makes some interesting choices in preparing and delivering this sermon. He chooses not to focus on a single scripture but the broad theological concept of grace. He makes no effort to explain what perhaps is unexplainable in Aiden's choice to end his own life. He chooses not to develop or elaborate on the choice Aiden made to give his life to Christ and how the same choice is one that each of us will also need to make at some point. Finally he attempts to compensate for his lack of personal relationship with the deceased by incorporating a eulogy both in his message and by allowing family and friends to speak in the middle of the sermon.

The strength of this sermon lies in the illustration of grasping his young sons' wrists as an example of the grip of grace that God holds on each of His believers. Had Morris been given more time both for preparation and delivery, the sermon would have benefited from a solid scriptural foundation that could've been used to develop his big idea. Furthermore, upon reflection, perhaps less focus on the deceased and more focus on Christ's resurrection would have provided a longer-term sustainable message of hope for the congregation to walk away with.

In writing about the mental and physical attributes of suicide, Dr. Stanley Nuland writes, "alienated and alone, he is drawn to the grave, because there seems no other place to go. For those left out and left behind, it is impossible to make sense of the thing" (Nuland 150). Nonetheless, preachers are tasked with the

responsibility not of explaining God's will, but acknowledging God's presence even in our seemingly darkest and most hopeless days.

Aiden
Rev. Robert Morris

We have come here this morning,
not only to mourn the death of Aiden
a life cut short...
but also to celebrate his life.
A life.... that was a gift from God...

There are many of us - here this morning
who could speak about Aiden....

We all knew him to be - a kind and gentle person...
who was loved by so many...

and I am sure that if we went around the room this morning
that most everyone here – would have something they would want to share...
but there are 2 people
that have said that they would like to say a few words...

1st, I would like to bring up Abigail....

2nd, now I would like to ask Michael Cross to come forward...

I was one who did not have the privilege
to know Aiden very well...

We spoke a few times after church –
but I really have gotten to know him... in recent days...
through many of you, his friends and his family...

and I have gotten to know him through your eyes...

How many of you have shared with me
- what a great friend Aiden was...
- how he was a hero to some...
- how he was a giving person –
who would give the shirt off his back to someone in need...
- he loved children
- he loved his family...
his mom and dad, his brother and his wife and daughter...

- He loved the outdoors, fishing, hunting and shooting...

- and he excelled in all of these things...
- when he was just 17
- he won the first National Jr. Shooting Championship ...
- 3 years later he won the Nationals...
- but his achievements weren't things he ever bragged about
- he just wanted to be seen as a regular person
- someone who was authentic and real...,

Aiden in other ways had the heart of a big kid...
he loved to play practical jokes...
he loved to laugh...

his brother Brad told me that one Thanksgiving
that Aiden bet Brad
that Brad couldn't eat ½ of the Thanksgiving turkey by himself...
and if Brad did
then Aiden would clean up all the Thanksgiving dishes by himself....

well Brad ate ½ a turkey by himself
and Aiden had to clean the dishes...
Well, Brad threw-up for a couple of days...
but you can be sure... that Aiden thought washing the dishes
was a cheap price to pay to see that.....
Aiden loved a friendly bet...
Aiden loved to have a good time with his family and friends...

Aiden was a patient man
who loved nothing better
than teaching someone to shoot or hunt...

He was a man with a big heart...
I was told that one time...
when he was hunting... he wounded a deer
and stayed out all night tracking the deer – to put it out of its misery...

Aiden also loved nothing better than cooking up a lot of food
and having people over...

and there was also an artistic side of Aiden
he was a great artist...
a jewelry maker
and a painter...

and in recent months

Aiden also became a man of faith...

Last fall...

Aiden attended the Franklin Graham crusade...

and somehow in that event...

he realized something was missing in his life...

that there was a hole in his life – that couldn't be filled with anything
other than God Himself...

and that night...

he did something that was very difficult for a man to do...

he walked down front – in front of thousands of people...

and he gave his life to Christ...

He became a Christian...

And we all know...

that just because someone becomes a Christian

that doesn't mean that all their problems just magically go away...

And for Aiden,

that was certainly the case...

but I want you to know that

even though there were some things that ate away at Aiden

the bond between Aiden and his Lord – never broke...

I remember that when my kids were young

one of the favorite things we would do

was that I would give my wife a break sometimes

and I would take our 2 sons out for pizza...

we would eat and play video games and just have a great time

and my wife would just stay home and rest...

well I noticed that as I drove to the pizza place each time...

my guys would work themselves into a little frenzy... they were so excited...

so by the time we would get there...

they would want to jump out of the car

and sprint across the parking lot to the pizza place...

but I knew that it was a busy parking lot

with plenty of traffic

and I knew that it was too dangerous for them to run across by themselves...

I couldn't just hold their hands...
because kid's can sometimes pull away

so instead of just holding their hands
I knew I had to hold their wrists...

and that way...
no matter how they might try to yank and pull away
no matter how they twisted and turned...
I had them...
they couldn't get away...

and my friends
that's how God took hold of Aiden
when he gave his life to Christ...

and let me tell you
even now after this tragedy...
Christ still has him and will never let go.....

That's the way Christ loves us...

I think if Aiden could write a note
and send it down for us to read this morning
I think he'd write 2 things...

1st, that he was sorry...
sorry for the pain he has caused those he loved...
sorry for cutting short...
what might have been...

and 2nd, I believe that he would want us to know
that on that night last fall
that he found in Christ his Lord,
what his heart was searching for...

and that Christ took hold of him that night...
and has never let go...

we are grateful
for the gift of Aiden's life
for his love, for his kind heart

and we are grateful
that experienced for himself
the grip of Grace...

To God be the glory...
Amen.

Interview with Rev. Dr. Robert Morris

1. What are the unique challenges of preaching at a funeral for someone who has committed suicide?

Of course, there is always guilty feelings and often anger that the family feels toward the deceased. Also there are questions about the salvation of someone who kills themselves. Even though I don't think that a crisis is the time to teach theology, at that kind of funeral I try to talk about the power of grace and mercy.

2. You seem to indicate that Aiden is in heaven (i.e. send down a note from above), but you don't really come right out with it. Is that intentional? Why or why not?

I believe that Aiden is in heaven... he just temporarily lost his mind. But doing a suicide funeral when the person is clearly not a believer is much tougher.

3. Not including the time that you spend with the family, how long does it usually take for you to prepare your funeral messages?

2 hours.

4. How does your preparation for funeral sermons/homilies differ from your Sunday morning preparations?

I don't use a crisis time to teach theology. Rather it is a time to talk about faith, legacies, and the hope we have in Jesus.

5. What do you feel is an acceptable length for a funeral sermon/homily?

5-10 minutes

6. Do you always place a time for eulogies in the middle of your sermon? Why or why not? (Interestingly enough, I ask because of all the preachers I interviewed, you are unique in this area).

Usually like to end with the Lord's Prayer and dedication of the soul to the Lord. I just feel like it flows better – not really a theological reason.

7. What determines the Biblical content of your funeral sermons and how do you develop that content?

The faith of the deceased determines quite a bit. If they are believers – then I build on that; if they are not believers I talk about the grace of God.

8. Do you prefer to use standard scriptures (i.e. Psalm 23, John 14, etc.) as a pattern for your funeral sermons/homilies? Why or why not?

Yes... because those texts are most comforting to people.

9. Were you aware that there is no scripture used in the sermon itself? What is the thought process behind that?

All the scripture was read before the sermon. No need to repeat it.

10. Do you repeat your exegesis each time you use reoccurring scriptures? Why or why not?

I do... to save time.

11. What do you perceive as the preacher's role in a funeral?

I speak for the Savior and His Church.

12. What do you feel is the ultimate purpose of a funeral sermon/homily?

To comfort and give hope to the grieving would ultimately be the purpose.

13. Would you say that you use one sermon with modifications or unique sermons for each funeral?

No.

14. Is the structure of your funeral sermon/homily similar to your typical Sunday morning sermon? Why or why not?

Yes, but shorter.

15. Who do you consider to be your primary audience at a funeral?

The family and friends of the deceased.

16. Do you use notes when you preach at funeral?

Yes, most of the time.

17. Is there anything that makes preaching at funerals unique from preaching on other occasions?

Funerals are full of people who never go to church... an opportunity to draw folks back to Christ.

Sermon on the Occasion of the Death of a Child

Felicia was a twelve year-old little girl from the middle of Tennessee. She had two loving parents and a sister, Amanda. She died of cancer.

The death of a child is always traumatic. Whether sudden or as a result, as in this case, of a long-term illness, the death of a child flies in the face of normalcy. It upsets the commonly accepted order of nature. Parents do not expect to out-live their children or to have to stand by helplessly watching them die.

Rev. Tim Reynolds, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Hendersonville, Tennessee, delivered the following sermon in the only way he knew how... honestly. His introductory statement clearly communicates to the congregation that he will not be providing them with answers, nor will he claim to speak of God's will. He confesses from the very beginning that he is struggling with Felicia's death on the same level as many in the congregation. He is angry. He is hurt. And he's seeking comfort. And throughout the entire sermon he demonstrates that although he is the pastor, the spiritual leader, he is also a child of God, just like all of the other children of God gathered to mourn Felicia.

It should be noted that although this sermon is loosely based on 2 Samuel 12:15b-23 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, it is not expository in content or delivery. Reynolds shares that the big ideas that he was attempting to communicate included the premise that "there are no easy answers as to why this happened and it's okay to be angry with God. God hurt just like we did over what happened and in that is our hope." While that may have been what he felt was the big idea, the transcript of his

sermon would imply otherwise. Instead, he addresses the issues of anger at God and hope in the resurrection.

Reynolds works through the questions that he presented in the introduction but then goes on to speak of the hope that sets followers of Jesus Christ apart from the hopeless. Although he does not mention specific scripture, he shares the theological concept that those who have been baptized into the death of Christ are also baptized into His resurrection. He uses what is written in scripture to speak of the future for both Felicia and those who love her and he does it in a way that rings true instead of attempting to set up a cosmic reunion that will pick up and resume in heaven exactly the way it was on earth.

One of the unique aspects of Reynolds approach is that he takes on the issues that can create some of the most common and painful mistakes that preachers can make on the occasion of the death of a child.

According to Jeffrey Newlin, there are three things that should never be said at the death of a child :

1. “Don’t weep – they have been delivered.
2. It is God’s will.
3. Do not rush towards tidy answers and easy consolation, especially by quoting scripture” (Newlin qtd. in Bush 124).

Reynolds addresses the first two of the suggestions directly in his sermon. He speaks of the idea of being sad as part of our humanity. In addressing the children he says, “children – listen to me. Don’t listen to grownups when they tell you to be

strong and not to cry. If you want to cry, go ahead and cry. There's no shame in it. It doesn't mean that you're not strong, it means that you are human."

Never does Reynolds claim to speak with the knowledge of God's will in Felicia's death. In fact, he goes to extremes to communicate to the congregation that we simply do not know the will of God. Before he goes on to elaborate on this idea, he addresses several of the most common sayings that well-meaning friends and family offer in times such as these (i.e. "God needed Felicia in heaven so he took her home; God's work with Felicia was done.") He carefully, not to mention pastorally, addresses how comments like these can be especially hurtful to families in grief and echoes William Sloane Coffin's sentiment that, "the one thing that should never be said when someone dies is, 'it is the will of God.' Never do we know enough to say that." (Coffin qtd. in Bush 57).

"Grief is like a long valley, a winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape" (Lewis 69). Because grief is a process, preachers' words intersect with families and friends in a different and unique time for each and every unique death. In cases where children have died, the grieving process can be extremely long and winding. There will be birthdays, graduations, and other milestone events that will remind grieving parents of what could've been and what, perhaps, should have been. Those will be the days that the message of hope communicated at the funeral will play a vital role. However, hope may not be as well-received immediately following a death. In such cases, a preacher will want to communicate comfort. Newlin reflects on this as he speaks about families grieving the loss of a child, "would they emerge with any hope, any joy, with any purpose?"

They didn't know. So they looked desperately for comfort" (Newlin qtd in Bush 123).

Reynolds presented a sermon that spoke both comfort and hope, a gift to the glory of God for the family in the present and in the future.

Felicia

Rev. Tim Reynolds

2nd Samuel 12:15b-23 & 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

2 SAMUEL 12:15-23

¹⁵Then Nathan went to his house. The LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife bore to David, and it became very ill. ¹⁶David therefore pleaded with God for the child; David fasted, and went in and lay all night on the ground. ¹⁷The elders of his house stood beside him, urging him to rise from the ground; but he would not, nor did he eat food with them. ¹⁸On the seventh day the child died. And the servants of David were afraid to tell him that the child was dead; for they said, "While the child was still alive, we spoke to him, and he did not listen to us; how then can we tell him the child is dead? He may do himself some harm." ¹⁹But when David saw that his servants were whispering together, he perceived that the child was dead; and David said to his servants, "Is the child dead?" They said, "He is dead." ²⁰Then David rose from the ground, washed, anointed himself, and changed his clothes. He went into the house of the LORD, and worshiped; he then went to his own house; and when he asked, they set food before him and he ate. ²¹Then his servants said to him, "What is this thing that you have done? You fasted and wept for the child while it was alive; but when the child died, you rose and ate food." ²²He said, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, 'Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me, and the child may live.' ²³But now he is dead; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me."

1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

¹³But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have died. ¹⁵For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. ¹⁶For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Let me just say what everyone is thinking right now – or has thought at some point during all of this – this sucks

it's not right – it's not fair
why did this have to happen?
she didn't deserve this
they didn't deserve this
what kind of a God would let this happen?

all of these things – and more – I have said myself

it isn't right and it isn't fair and Felicia didn't deserve her cancer
she did nothing wrong

her parents did nothing wrong – her sister did nothing wrong

and I don't know why this happened

and I don't know why God let it happen

I'm not going to stand up here today and try and answer those questions
because I can't

so what are we going to say?

what words of comfort and hope and encouragement are there to share?

that's what we came here for – isn't it?

to share our love with Lance and Terry and Amanda

and Bob and Anna and Dick and Carolyn

and all of Felicia's aunts and uncles and cousins

and to hear – feel – touch something that will make us feel better

that will make this easier to understand

to hear a word of hope

I have to be honest – there are times when we just don't know what to say

when probably the best thing is silence and a shared hug

a soft reassuring touch on the arm

but we are uncomfortable with silence – we have to talk

we need to talk – to SAY something

so we end up saying all sorts of things

empty clichés and phrases we've heard on TV or in the movies

"I'm sorry for your loss" – "my heart goes out to you" –

"our prayers are with you"

when all we really mean – but can't say – is "I love you"

and we take it a step further – don't we?

we're uncomfortable with our own grief so we rush to the positive

we want to fix things, to make them better – we want things to be alright

so we keep talking and say things like

"don't be sad – she's in a better place"

"don't be sad – she's with the angels"

"don't be sad – her pain and suffering have ended"

and while all those things might be true

why don't we want people to be sad? – what's wrong with being sad?
we should be sad – we should be hurting – we should feel pain
it's okay to be sad – it's okay to be angry
it's part of being human

children – listen to me

don't listen to grownups when they tell you to be strong and not to cry
if you want to cry – go ahead and cry...there's no shame in it
it doesn't mean you're not strong – it means you're human

adults – listen to me

if you want to be angry at God – be angry at God
David got angry at God and questioned him
Job got angry at God and questioned him
Habakkuk got angry at God and questioned him
even Jesus on the cross questioned God and felt forsaken
My God, my God...why have you forsaken me?
it was one of Jesus' most human moments

the pain is not going to go away

we are not going to get over this
if we want to deal with it – we must embrace it – find where it fits
we learn to live with the pain so it doesn't cripple us down the road
Paul talks about this
he says we are to grieve – just differently from those without hope

there are so many in this world that have no true hope

they cannot embrace their anger and sadness
they want to rush beyond it because they have no answer to it
but Paul says Christians have the answer
what enables us to grieve differently is our hope
we say that the one word we have to say in the face of death IS hope
but the grieving *must* come – it must be part of the process
otherwise – rushing to the hope sounds trite
“I know you just lost your precious daughter after months of fighting...
but cheer up! – we have hope in Christ!”

but sometimes Christians – being human – don't stop with the hope

we try to guess what God is thinking
we try to explain away something there is no explanation for
“God needed Felicia in heaven so he took her home”
well...we needed her here – couldn't God wait?
“God needed her to go through what she did to touch lives”
she touched plenty of lives before the cancer – was that for nothing?
“God's work with Felicia was done”

how could it be done? – she had so much potential

I'm not trying to offend anyone who has said these things – or who believes it
really – I'm happy for you if you do
but I'm just not there
we don't know what God needs or wants
it might make *us* feel better to say it
but have you thought how it might sound to Lance, Terry and Amanda?
“your child that you gave birth to and nurtured
your child that you protected and cared for for 12 years
your sister that you looked up to and spent your whole life with
has just been ripped from you...
but God wanted it that way”
I think that might make them a bit resentful of God

I don't believe in a God that would make an innocent child suffer
just to reach a few lost souls –
surely the ruler of the universe could find another way

I *am* angry at God about all of this – and I'm not ashamed to say it
I cannot accept it was God's will that Felicia get cancer
the God I come to know in the Bible is one of love and caring
of mercy and forgiveness
not one who would strike someone with a disease to get what he wants
and you can say – but God's will is hidden
and yes I know it is and I don't pretend to understand
and I know he sees the whole picture while we see in a mirror dimly
but I do NOT believe that the loving God of all there is,
the God of Justice and Love and Mercy
would WILL the suffering of an innocent child

I don't believe God wanted Lance and Terry and Amanda to have their hearts ripped
out
or that he wants places like Vanderbilt Children's hospital to exist in the first place
no – I do not believe God willed this to happen
I don't know why it happened – it just did
I cannot explain it – nor will I try

but despite it all, I do believe that God is merciful and just
I believe what Joseph says in Genesis
and what the Bible witnesses to over and over again
that God brings good out of bad
that God can bend any situation – even the most painful situations
to accomplish his will and his plan for salvation
I do not believe God intended for Felicia to have cancer
I do not believe God intends for us to hurt like this

but I do believe that God's grace was evident in Felicia's life
as he took a terrible situation and touched countless lives
as he took the hopes and the fears of this family
as he is taking them right now
and using them as a witness to his love and grace
they have come here today – like David so long ago – in the midst of their pain and
suffering – to worship God
having done all they could while Felicia was here
they come before God today to praise him for her life
having gone without sleep and without eating
having fervently prayed for healing for months
they have now – like David – come into the house of the Lord to worship
and they told me to tell you that their prayers *were* answered
not exactly as they had hoped – but they were answered nonetheless

they wanted me to be sure and say that on Tuesday, August 24th 2004
at 2:30 p.m. Central Standard Time
Felicia was healed by God our Father in heaven

when people are willing to praise God in the midst of their suffering
when they are open to being used by him & place their faith & trust in him
in the midst of their anger and confusion
when they are willing to witness to the hope they have in him
when they could have chosen to be bitter and resentful
you better look out – because God will use them like no other

do you know how many lives God has touched through Felicia?
get an idea by looking around
you heard the stories that were told today
you have told your own stories in the last few days

do you know that there is a 6 year-old girl in this congregation who wanted to start
coming to church because Felicia and Amanda were kind to her and made her feel
special when she came here?

Felicia touched lives wherever she went – school, softball, girl scouts, her dad's
friends, her mom's friends, singing with different choirs, and here at church
she touched lives because she had a deep and abiding love of Jesus
she chose to see God in everyone
she made everyone feel special
because she recognized that everyone is special – as a child of God

Felicia understood Philippians 2:4 better than anyone else I have ever met
Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others
not long after she was diagnosed with cancer

she became aware of infants in Vanderbilt hospital
asked Knit-Wits to begin knitting things for the babies

I'll tell you what else I know

I know God hurts along with Lance and Terry and Amanda
because God the Father knows what it is like to lose a child
when Christ the Son was beaten and whipped and spit on and crucified
God knew what it is like to watch a child suffer and to watch a child die
he could have intervened at any moment – but didn't
because he saw the bigger picture and knew it had to be so
Felicia's family watched their child be poked and prodded
tested and re-tested
suffer pain and side effects from the chemo
watched the nurses and doctors make Felicia bleed as they tried to run IV's
God could have intervened at any moment – but didn't
we don't know why
but we do know that God knows the pain the Dary's are feeling & shares it

and I also know death is not the final word – God has the final word

just as Christ was resurrected from the dead for eternal life
so will we be
so will Felicia be
and that is the hope in which we put our faith
that is the promise that allows us to grieve differently
differently than those who have no hope
and that is the hope with which we encourage one another
in the midst of our tears
in the midst of our anger
in the midst of our confusion
and in the midst of our doubts

it is THE Hope – the Hope that followers of Jesus Christ have

it is the one word we have to speak in face of suffering, of death, of pain
hope in the promise that this is not all there is
this painful place where children suffer and get cancer and parents and siblings and
grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins hurt
and nurses have to watch decent Christian people leave the hospital with a cart full of
presents and balloons and pictures but no child with which to share them

hope in the promise from Zechariah that there is a place where children play in the
streets and their parents sit and watch without fear that something bad might happen
to them

hope that just as the 12 year-old Jesus sat in his Father's house and told his parents
they should not have been worried

the 12 year-old Felicia is now sitting in her Father's house – the house with many rooms that Jesus promised to go and prepare – and so *her* parents need not be worried

hope that the empty tomb and empty cross are symbols that God has conquered death and won the ultimate victory

hope that while Felicia may have ultimately lost her battle here on earth
she is with the God that has won the war
and we will one day be reunited with her in the resurrection that is to come
that even now from Felicia's point of view – her family is already together
and she is with them basking in the eternal presence of God

and THAT hope does not disappoint
because God is faithful and true
and I can say that – even when I am angry at him
even when I feel abandoned
because the God I come to know in the Scriptures is faithful
even when – especially when – we are not

we will celebrate Felicia's life because of this – hope
and if you need a sign of this hope... The Dove story
it's okay to grieve – but let us not forget hope
the hope of abundant and eternal life that springs from Jesus Christ
it is because of this hope that we can celebrate the life of Felicia today.

Interview with Rev. Tim Reynolds

1. Not including the time that you spend with the family, how long does it usually take for you to prepare your funeral messages?

It is difficult to exclude the time I spend with the family from my funeral message preparation because that is part of the preparation, especially if I am closer to the family than I was to the deceased. (This happens quite often.) The night before the funeral I usually invite all the family – and I let them define family – to a time of remembrance and sharing. We sit in a circle and I ask them to share stories with one another about the deceased. I tell them these can be funny, touching, sad – whatever stories they have that communicates who this person was to them. I will often ask them to share something they think no one else knows. We close the time with prayer. Then I go back to the office and write down as much as I can remember. I usually have a Scripture passage by this point – either one they chose or I chose – and begin to weave the stories of the person's life into the sermon itself. I complete it the following morning. So – the family time usually lasts about an hour. Prior to that I will have probably done an hour's work. Following the family time, I usually spend another 2-3 hours. So in total, 4-5 hours.

2. Given the unique circumstances surrounding the death that precipitated this message, how long did it take you to prepare?

It took much longer to prepare the particular message you read. I began working on it a couple of weeks before Felicia passed, as the end seemed imminent. It never really felt quite right, however, until she actually passed. I spent several days just visiting and speaking with all sorts of people that were impacted by Felicia's life and death and began to hear the same themes over and over again. I realized that many people were feeling the same anger, confusion, and frustration. These were emotions I had felt, as well, and I thought the best thing I could do would be to give voice to these emotions and affirm them as valid. In this particular case, the total time was probably upwards of 25 hours of preparation. And I still felt it wasn't enough.

3. What do you perceive as the preacher's role in a funeral?

Great question, however I want to generalize it first. I perceive the preacher's role surrounding death in our day and time and with this generation of believers is: to give people permission to question and be angry with God. I do not think this can be overestimated. For generations – especially the Builder Generation – people were told not to question God; to just accept his will and move on. This has taught us to be a people that do not handle grief well. People think it's heretical or unfaithful to get angry with God or to ask why in the face of death. This has led to all the pithy clichés that exist around death. I HATE to hear people say, "Ours is not to question why." Because the thing is, people ARE

going to question and people ARE going to be angry and if they stifle those emotions they will come out in unhealthy ways. People need to be taught that not only is it faithful, it is biblical to question God and to be angry with him. This is what having a good relationship is all about. So the primary job of the preacher/pastor is to give permission for this to happen, to take away the guilt people feel about doing it, and to normalize it by lifting up the scriptural examples (David, Job, Jesus, etc.) of this happening. To then get specific and answer the initial question regarding the funeral itself, the preacher's role is to be aware of this dynamic and normalize the grieving process. The secondary role is to then speak hope into the midst of this situation so that we "grieve, but not as those who have no hope." So often, people in the midst of grief cannot articulate hope, so it becomes the role of the preacher to do so.

4. Tell me about the decision to use the word "sucks"?

It's what everyone was thinking but was afraid to say. It's powerful enough to be shocking, but not vulgar enough to be extremely offensive. I wanted to set the tone quickly and I felt this accomplished it. Many people afterwards said it was exactly what they were thinking and they appreciated me being honest enough to share that.

5. Looking back on your paragraph starting, "I'm not trying to offend..." did you ever worry that you might be putting words/thoughts into the mouths/heads of Lance & Terry?

No, that was the direct result of conversations with them over the preceding days.

6. You seem to have many big ideas that you are trying to communicate in this sermon. What would be the #1 idea you would've wanted the congregation to walk away with? Do you think you accomplished it?

The number one idea for this particular sermon was different from most for me, and it was this: there are no easy answers as to why this happened and it's okay to be angry with God. The second was close behind: God hurt just like we did over what happened and in that is our hope. Based on the number of responses over the following weeks, I believe I accomplished communicating the primary idea.

7. What is "the dove" story?

It was a story I hated, theologically speaking. But 3 members of the family sought me out before the funeral to tell it to me. It was important to them, so I felt it was important to include it. Felicia's favorite bird was the dove. They are rare in our part of Tennessee. In fact, they are hardly ever seen. But as the family was leaving the home to go to the funeral home the day of the funeral, a dove was sitting on the telephone line outside their house. Their other daughter,

Amanda, noticed it and pointed it out to the whole family. After they all saw it, the dove flew away.

8. Did you know that you used the word "I" almost 30 times? Did you ever worry that you were making yourself and your issues of grief the central focus?

I didn't worry about it. This was exactly what I was doing on purpose. You have to understand the context. Here in the south, most preachers – especially those of the more conservative denominations – preach “at” people, especially at funerals. They fall back on all the clichés – the ones I mention in the sermon. They tell parents who lose children that they need to be strong – that God wanted their child or that God has a plan that we can't see and we need to trust. They do not normalize the natural process of questioning God. In fact, they make people – especially parents – feel guilty for doing so. And usually they end up leaving the church. People around here have never – and I mean NEVER – hear a pastor speak of doubting or questioning or being angry with God. It just isn't done. Yet – I believe that it is one of the primary things we need to be about as pastors – giving people permission to doubt and question. In order to do that, it *had* to be personal. The only way in this context to give people permission to feel those emotions, to affirm their existence – was to confess my own. To hear a *pastor* say out loud the things that they had felt, but had always been “corrected” by other pastors for feeling, offered them a safe space in which to express their own emotions honestly.

9. How does your preparation for funeral sermons/homilies differ from your Sunday morning preparations?

Preparation for funeral sermons is more narrowly focused, in terms of context. On a given Sunday there are many different subtexts within the general context. I have to decide which subtexts to address and which subtexts to ignore as I move through the text. Often, the Scripture will be appropriate for dealing several of the subtexts in the context, and there is a conscious decision to go a certain direction. As for funeral sermons, the context and subtexts are usually – not always – very much in line with one another, so the focus comes much more quickly. Everyone is going through this shared experience of loss, so it directs me more quickly. In that respect, there is less pre-preparatory work than on a Sunday. I also do not usually consult commentaries and the like for funeral sermons, preferring instead to draw from the stories I explained above.

10. What do you feel is an acceptable length for a funeral sermon/homily?

Except in extremely particular circumstances – like the one you read, which involved the death of a child from cancer, or the one I did a few weeks ago involving a soldier killed in Iraq – I believe 10-12 minutes should be the goal. It is a celebration of life – not a time to deal with theological questions and teachings. It feels more celebratory when kept within the normal attention span

(thank you television!) of the average person. This is especially true if: a) there are people there who aren't used to hearing you and your style, b) there are people there who don't normally attend church, c) a combination of a & b. When dealing with special circumstances, such as those mentioned above, however, I believe it is appropriate to go longer – 20-30 minutes if that is what is necessary to deal with the questions that are present. I believe that in the face of extreme circumstances, it is better to go long than to ignore what everyone is wrestling with. We get to speak into the silence of those times, if you will, and that is a responsibility not to be taken lightly.

11. What determines the Biblical content of your funeral sermons and how do you develop that content?

Hopefully the deceased chose a verse ahead of their passing. If not, hopefully the family knows their favorite verse. In those two situations, I go with that. No matter what it is, I believe the Holy Spirit holds your hand and uncovers things appropriate to the situation, even if at first glance it seems the text may not be particularly appropriate to the occasion of death. If neither of those is the case, I very much affirm that the funeral is a Celebration of and Witness to the Resurrection. So I pray through the normal verses appropriate to that occasion and, holding the particular circumstance of the person's life or death before me, go with the one I feel the Spirit prompting me towards. The development of it is the same thing. I listen to the stories, think of the life being celebrated, put that in the context of God's larger work in Jesus Christ and go from there.

12. Do you prefer to use standard scriptures (i.e. Psalm 23, John 14, etc.) as a pattern for your funeral sermons/homilies? Why or why not?

I always use Psalm 23 as the Affirmation of Faith, especially if the deceased is over 40. There is something that people find extremely comforting about saying that together. And – I use the KJV. It is the only time I ever do so. Again – it is about comfort. I use John 14 at the graveside. On a few occasions I have used it for funeral sermons, but that has been because it was the favorite of the deceased. I guess the answer to this is no, I do not prefer to use standard scriptures, but I do use them in the absence of anything else to go on. Of these, my favorite would be Thessalonians.

13. Do you repeat your exegesis each time you use reoccurring scriptures? Why or why not?

Yes and no. I generally do not repeat the exegesis if it's a very familiar scripture to me, such as Thessalonians or 2 Corinthians. However, I do re-read it in light of the person's life being celebrated and/or the circumstances surrounding their death to see if it speaks to me in new ways.

14. What do you feel is the ultimate purpose of a funeral sermon/homily?

To proclaim the hope that we have as believers in Jesus Christ, to comfort those who are grieving, and to normalize the grief process are the ultimate purposes of the funeral homily. (Can you have 3 ultimates?)

15. Should all funeral sermons/homilies have the same "big idea"? If so, what should that big idea be? If not, why?

I believe that *generally* funeral sermons should have the same big idea, however I will stop short of saying all. (I don't like to be that boxed in!) This big idea is the witness to the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the life we all find in him. Secondarily, the idea that the deceased was part of the fulfillment of God's Kingdom and how that purpose is now fulfilled. This is much more difficult in certain circumstance, especially if the person was not a believer or you know little about their life or – as has happened – the deceased was a real jerk in life – however, it can be done gracefully and tactfully by focusing on the first big idea.

16. Would you say that you use one sermon with modifications or unique sermons for each funeral?

I think, for the most part, every funeral sermon is finding a new way to say the same thing. Sometimes that will mean that they sound the same, even though they are not. I prefer unique sermons for each funeral, but there are definitely 2 or 3 themes that run through them all. I have, on occasion, especially if I didn't know the person and they were not part of this congregation, taken a previously used sermon and made modifications to it. However, I do not prefer to do this.

17. Is the structure of your funeral sermon/homily similar to your typical Sunday morning sermon? Why or why not?

My funeral sermons are not similar to my typical Sunday sermons. Those tend to be pedantic, full of teaching, and community and missionally oriented. I tend to think of them as symphonies with several movements that include a theme, restatement of a theme, a move away from the theme, variation on the theme, and a recapitulation of theme. Or something like that. The funeral sermon seems more to be a jingle, if you will. One tune that is easily remembered, so it doesn't need to be repeated or built upon. I do very little teaching, very little missional orientation directed at the community. The tune is resurrection life in Christ or comfort or celebration of life.

18. Who do you consider to be your primary audience at a funeral?

The primary audience at a funeral is the family of the deceased. The secondary audience is the gathered community of faith. I tend to be very contextual

19. Do you use notes when you preach at a funeral?

I do not preach from a manuscript either on Sundays or at funerals. I will often have a general outline in front of me at both, though I am more likely to have one in front of me at a funeral service, due to the lack of prep time. The only time I have preached from a full manuscript is the one I sent you. This was due to the very specific nature of what was happening, the multiple levels of what I was trying to do, and the amount of time I had spent trying to get the wording just right and wanting to communicate very specifically those ideas.

20. What kind of feedback (positive or negative) did you receive after this specific sermon?

I received many positive comments for many months following this sermon. The large majority of people said things like, “You said exactly what I was thinking but afraid to say.” As this was what I was aiming for, I considered it a blessing. Most people thanked me for being willing to be so vulnerable and how that had allowed them to be so. Only a couple of people took offense to my opening line – “Let me just say what we’re all thinking: this sucks!” Most people I spoke with said that this phrase served as a release for them.

21. Is there anything that makes preaching at funerals unique from preaching on other occasions?

Funerals, along with weddings, are the greatest opportunity we have to be heard by people who are not part of the Christians community and who may not know what the Gospel is really all about. Though I do not believe in taking the opportunity at a funeral to try and get commitments to Christ from people, I do believe that it is a unique opportunity to witness to and explain the resurrection and the hope that we have because of it.

Sermon on the Occasion of the Death of a Soldier

Sadly, this project is being written in a time of war. Although it was not originally intended to include a sermon on the death of a soldier, I include it now because more and more of my colleagues are faced with having to deliver funeral sermons for soldiers in their congregations who do not return home alive.

Walter Kaiser, on reflecting on God's provision in our lives, writes words that military families can appreciate when he writes, "in the face of the direst of adversities, Israel and we are offered hope. It is a word not about answers to the problem of evil; not a word about circumstances or men or movements. It is not a word about systems of political or even theological belief; it is simply a word about our Lord. He is faithful, He is love. He is gracious. He is full of compassion, He is our inheritance" (83).

This sermon delivered by Rev. Adam Donner, Associate Pastor of the Glenkirk Church in Glendora, California, was occasioned by the death of a young soldier named "Peter." Peter was a 19 years-old, serving in Iraq, when his humvee hit a bomb on a bridge and he was killed.

At the time of the service Donner was relatively new to the Glenkirk Church and had never met Peter. This may explain why Donner went into some detail of biographical data indicating that he had at least done his homework since he did not know the deceased personally.

War is a time of great sacrifice, not only on the part of the soldiers but their families as well. Donner chose John 15:9-17 to speak of the sacrifice that Peter made on behalf of his country and the sacrifice that Christ made on behalf of all humanity.

The strength of the sermon lies in Donner's ability to relate the scripture as it is while not getting side-tracked into the potential political and justice issues that might come up as a result of such a death. Donner does not enter into the debate about the righteousness of war, or look to blame politicians or other countries, nor does he provide commentary on Peter's decision to join the military. Donner is focused on the scripture and the tragic loss of a young man.

The focal verse is verse 13, "no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Donner does not specifically speak to this verse until he speaks specifically of what finally ended Peter's life. On the way to this part of the sermon, Donner weaves together the story of Peter's life as it runs parallel to the larger pericope of the scripture. Effort is spent to demonstrate Peter's life as a believer and that such a life is guided by principles that include loving one another as Christ loved us and being willing to sacrifice for one another as Christ did on our behalf.

This sermon speaks a word of instruction to the listener, but offers little comfort. Military funerals often offer words to the family and although Donner spoke about them, he did not speak directly to them. Perhaps this occurred in another part of the service. Additionally, there is a noticeable lack of attention paid to the resurrection and the hope that is offered to believers in it. When asked about this, Donner confessed that, "I did not speak directly to the resurrection in the sermon though much of the rest of the service (introduction, music, scripture and prayer) speaks to the hope of the resurrection. I felt my main audience (it was a large community service) [needed] to hear first that there is still a God who loves each one

of us.” The problem that this sermon illustrates for those who chose a non-expository path is “so what?” So there is a god who still loves you – so what?

Donner would argue that the “so what” is irrelevant since he saw that the main point of his sermon to be that “if we admire Peter for his demonstrated love, how much more does God demonstrate His love for us.” Yet, it is interesting to note that when asked how the congregation responded to his sermon all he could remember were, “generic words of appreciation.”

Donner made a wise choice in selecting his conclusion. He incorporated a prayer that is a part of military issue and was deeply personal to the deceased. The prayer speaks of God’s grace and preservation, something that those in the military and those who lose loved ones that served in the military need to be able to cope with their daily lives.

Although the sacrifices of our military are never to be belittled in any way, they are not to be mistaken as the sacrifice of Christ Himself. Donner kept that distinction clear. It is a reverent sermon, respectful of both the military and the family, pointing to the glory of God if not the resurrection itself.

Peter
Rev. Adam Donner
John 15:9-17 (select verses)

JOHN 15:9-17

⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. ¹²“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Peter was loved:

Peter was born September 16, 1985 in San Dimas. Even before that day, he was loved by his family waiting for him. Peter was everything to his mom, Alisha. When he was little and taking naps at granny's house while mom worked, he had a picture of his mom he would have to look at before he would fall asleep.

Peter's dad Noah loved him too. He spent time with him riding dune buggies, and driving in his monster truck. He was always there for his son.

Peter's family loved him.

Even though he chased his little sister around and around and around the house, Taylor loved him dearly.

His granny Marilyn, and great grandmother Martha helped raise him while mom worked. One summer granny took him to swim lessons day after day despite his cries to end the swim lessons. This lasted all summer as she tried to get him to enjoy the water. Finally, his great grandmother invited him into the pool one day and from then on they couldn't get him out of the pool.

Friends loved him too. They loved spending time with him - skating with him - snowboarding. They spent time at his house. He considered his Marine Corps friends his brothers.

But it wasn't just his family and friends who loved him. God loved him. Jesus reminds us, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.” Peter discovered this unending unconditional love of God. He saw this love lived out in his relatives lives on a day to day basis. This love was real in the groups he met with at church and in his youth pastor's life.

This love was so real in Peter's life that he internalized the command we hear Jesus speak about in the passage. "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you."

Peter shared the love he received with those around him. When his granny would give him a few extra dollars, he in turn shared the extra money with his friends, even when his granny insisted that the money was for him. He would remind her that she gave him the money and now he was free to give it away too.

When his family found out that he had enlisted in the marines, he told them, "you'll be proud of me, I'm not getting out, I want to be there for my country." Everyone in his family tried to talk him out of the marines, but they soon realized that he loved his country and no talking about the dangers was going to get him to change his mind.

He spent time with his family before he left for basic training. He was in the middle of working on his granny's childcare facility when he got called up. He loved his family.

He called his mother often from Iraq. The final call came mere hours before he died. He called his mom and told her, "I love you."

And then while on a mission to help another unit in trouble. Peter's lead humvee hit a bomb on a bridge. Luke, one of his close friends who was following behind him, tried but was unable to pull him from the burning car. Peter understood what Jesus was saying, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." Peter laid down his life for his friends, for those in the other unit he was trying to help, for his country and even for the Iraqis he was trying to help.

This afternoon as we have been reminded of our love for Peter, Peter's love for each one of us, we are also reminded of God's deep love for Peter and for each one of us.

Jesus revealed god's deep unending love for us. He longs to befriend each one of us and to have each one of us respond to his call.

When I first heard Peter's story, I was awed by his sacrifice and love for others. I suppose his story has motivated many of us to be like Peter in some small way. It is not too difficult to be nice, but to truly love others is difficult. But to truly love people without expecting anything back, I find impossible without having experienced it first.

When Jesus says you did not choose me, I chose you, he is saying that in the midst of our most unlovable moments even when we have walked away, God chooses to rain down his love on us. Jesus was willing to lay down his life so that we might experience the fullness of God's love even when we don't deserve it. Peter experienced and knew this love. And ultimately enabled it him to live out Jesus Command : Love each other. That characteristic we all saw so vividly in Peter.

Inside Peter's possessions was a prayer booklet and in it one page was folded over, "a prayer at bedtime." It describes our love for god and our thankfulness for god saving love of us. I am sure Peter prayed it many times and I would ask that you join me silently praying this prayer.

Oh my god, I adore you, and I love you with all my heart. I thank you for having created me, having saved me by your grace, and for having preserved me

this day. I pray that you will take for yourself whatever good I might have done this day, and that you will forgive me whatever evil I might have done.

Protect me this night, and may your grace be with me always and with those I love. Amen

Interview with Rev. Adam Donner

1. Did you ever meet Peter personally?

No.

2. Not including the time that you spend with the family, how long does it usually take for you to prepare your funeral messages?

I take anywhere from a couple of hours when I use one my outlines that I have done in the past to 8 or more hours for one that I put together from scratch.

3. Given the unique circumstances surrounding the death that precipitated this message, how long did it take you to prepare?

I think I spent closer to 8 hours.

4. How does your preparation for funeral sermons/homilies differ from your Sunday morning preparations?

The person's life is the illustration so that I have that already before I start. I spend time praying to see what scripture might intersect, speak into, or give further meaning to their life. I am continually amazed that God gives me a wide range of scripture for some very unique situations.

5. What do you feel is an acceptable length for a funeral sermon/homily?

This depends quite a bit on the audience. Sometime I feel like I am preaching primarily to the spouse or parent or child, but sometimes I feel like I am preaching to the friends. For audiences who have little faith, I tend towards less than 10 minutes. For those who have more faith I tend to feel freer to go beyond ten minutes

6. Do you repeat your exegesis each time you use reoccurring scriptures? Why or why not?

I tend to not redo a bunch of study for the sake of the time crunch between meeting with a family and the service. I can pull points or even refocus points depending on the need.

7. What you perceive as the preacher's role in a funeral?

I perceive my primary role as pointing people to the hope of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

8. What do you feel is the ultimate purpose of a funeral sermon/homily?

The ultimate purpose of the sermon is to communicate the hope of the resurrection.

9. Should all funeral sermons/homilies have the same "big idea"? If so, what should that big idea be? If not, why?

My main point varies slightly with the specific text I preach.

10. Would you say that you use one sermon with modifications or unique sermons for each funeral?

I have a couple I use fairly often and then for some situations I start from scratch.

11. Is the structure of your funeral sermon/homily similar to your typical Sunday morning sermon? Why or why not?

My structure typically varies because it is shorter in length and I am not elaborating on supporting points.

12. Do you use notes when you preach at funeral?

I use a manuscript but have much of it memorized.

13. What kind of feedback (positive or negative) did you receive after this specific sermon?

All I can remember were generic words of appreciation

14. Is there anything that makes preaching at funerals unique from preaching on other occasions?

People seem very open to the gospel in times of grief. I want to give them an opportunity to hear the gospel without manipulating them.

15. Looking back at this sermon, do you feel you adequately communicated the hope of the resurrection? Why or why not?

I did not speak directly to the resurrection in the sermon though much of the rest of the service (introduction, music, scripture and prayer), speaks to the hope of the resurrection. I felt my main audience was a large community. I wanted them to hear first that there is still a God who loves each one of us.

16. What would you say is the "big idea" of this sermon?

If we admire Peter for his demonstrated love, how much more does God demonstrate His love for us?

Sermon on the Occasion of the Death of a Non-Believer

“The task of pastoral work is to comfort without in any way avoiding the human realities of guilt or denying the divine realities of judgement” (Kaiser 12). The reality for non-believers is that their salvation is not assured. The only thing that we can say with certainty for non-believers is that they will be judged before God Almighty who will ultimately decide their eternal fate.

There are several ways to preach at a funeral for a non-believer. The first way would be not to preach at all, avoiding a funeral sermon in favor of a eulogy. The second way would be to preach the Gospel as one would on any occasion, encouraging listeners to examine and evaluate their own relationship with God. And the third way would be to take some aspect of the deceased’s life, find a scripture that could be illustrated by such an aspect and then present that scripture accordingly.

In the case of Edward, Rev. Adam Donner, Associate Pastor of the Glenkirk Church in Glendora, California, chose a combination of the first and third way, opting to entirely leave out any discussion of the resurrection or the need for a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

This sermon is predominately a eulogy which may have been what Donner felt necessary, given the congregation who would hear his message. Edward was not a militant atheist and instead was a man who denied his faith when faced with a long-term illness and, as a result, alienated himself from many of his friends. As Dr. Stanley Nuland points out, “much less commonly than at any other time in this millennium do the dying nowadays turn to God and the promise of an afterlife when the present life is fading” (Nuland 256). Should Nuland’s statement prove accurate,

Edward's story will not be unique and pastors will need to determine how to handle these increasingly secular funeral services.

Outside of demonstrating how Edward's life paralleled the directions in the scripture, there is no biblical foundation for the sermon. In this sense, Donner's approach is secular in nature. "The greatest dignity to be found in death is the dignity of the life that preceded it. Hope resides in the meaning of what our lives have been" (Nuland 242). Since Donner had no way of knowing what the future might hold for Edward, any words to the contrary would have rung false. Since he chose to speak of the deceased, he had no choice but to comfort the family with the false hope of a life well-lived. And although such words may indeed provide comfort in the short-term, they do not provide sustenance for the eternal issues that the family members will ultimately have to face.

This sermon is included in this collection because it is typical of what preachers are tempted to do when faced with preaching on the occasion of the death of a non-believer. Such sermons could be tremendously strengthened by "big idea" preaching. These sermons provide wide-open opportunities to choose from a wide variety of scripture since the deceased was not likely to have scriptures of preference. Should a preacher shy away from speaking of the resurrection or eternal life for whatever reason, any scripture selected would still have a big idea that could be communicated. In addition, once the homiletical idea is formed, it will greatly assist the preacher in determining which illustrations from the deceased's life are the most appropriate and valuable, thus not just giving a eulogy for eulogy-sake.

One final note on this topic : a eulogy is simply not the proclamation of the Word. To sprinkle scripture in the storylines of the life of the deceased still does not make it proclamation. Just because the death of a non-believer precipitated the gathering of the congregation does not mean that efforts to communicate the Gospel should be abandoned. In fact, faced with the reality of one lost soul already, preachers should want to communicate the eternal hope of salvation with great passion on such an occasion.

Edward
Rev. Adam Donner
Romans 12:6-10

ROMANS 12:6-10

⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. ⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.

Edward's Life:

The apostle Paul writes, "We each have different gifts, according to the grace given to us by God. If a person's gift is serving, let him serve; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully. Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves." (Rom 12:6ff)

Edward gave generously, showed mercy, clung to what was good, was devoted to others and loved deeply. Edward was born April 4, 1948 and died Sept. 8, 2006. He is survived by his wife MaryJo, 3 daughters, Ashley, Alison and Tricia, and son-in-laws, Brian, Steven and Tim, two granddaughters Ember and Lila. MaryJo and Edward always said they never had any boys, but they got three good ones.

Edward loved his family- He was deeply devoted to his wife MaryJo. The day she walked into the phone company where they worked, he knew instantly that he would marry her. Together they raised 3 daughters, trusting them as they grew older to make wise choices for themselves. He listened to them and supported their interests with a never ending supply of articles and TV footage about potty training, managerial skills, and reports on crime. He never stopped thinking about his family and how he could help them.

He was devoted to his mom Lauren Loader. She had adopted him at just a few days of age. Despite striking out on his own at an early age, even hitchhiking across the US, he remained by her side helping when her health declined.

He was also devoted to his wife's family, always treating them as his own. MaryJo and Edward took many joyful trips with Gwen and Alan. He also befriended her brother Teddy and cared for him dearly.

Edward loved to celebrate with family and friends nearly year round. There were flags to be waved at Groundhogs day and the Easter beagle debate each spring.

At Christmas time, he cajoled his daughters to believe in Santa even as they grew older because, “if you don’t believe you won’t receive.”

Edward found any excuse to celebrate. Parades were one of his favorite. From local parades a few blocks long to sitting on the curb at the Rose Parade to watching them on TV. Edward loved to celebrate others with his family.

He loved his friends as well. The party started when Edward showed up. There was “camping Edward”. Every year there was a camping trip with upwards of 30 families. Despite falling in a hole one year that his daughters had dug and a few incidents with the flaming gorilla, family and friends gathered each year, bringing together new and old friends.

To say that Edward loved children is an understatement. In his early years he worked in an alternative preschool and aspired to help children by being a child psychologist. Always attracting children where ever he went, he constantly engaged on the latest theories and books on child rearing. Edward desired kids to have a fun and happy life.

Edward even loved those with whom he disagreed. Though you might describe Edward as opinionated, he always listened, trying to understand your point of view. He might eventually challenge you on a point and dish out some sarcasm, but he listened.

Edward loved music, particularly the blues. He played harmonica even in the most unusual circumstances. Once in high school as the senior class president he climbed on to the roof to play his harmonica to try to distract a fight that had broken out. Motorists were often puzzled watching him play his harmonica while driving on the freeway. Maybe they were just worried because they could see that his hand wasn’t on the steering wheel.

Not too long ago, he even checked himself out of the hospital to make it to a concert. It took him half the concert to climb the stairs to make it to his high seats, but he made it. For many years he was known as “Left Coast Edward” by blues fans who listened to him on KSPC and read his writings in Southland Blues Magazine. His love of music was a gift for others. He spent countless hours preparing for his broadcasts so that people might enjoy the music.

Edward loved the kitchen. He was thrilled when he got to appear on his friend’s cable cooking show “man in the kitchen” as he cooked up his vegetarian southern food to live blues music.

He grocery shopped , cooked, and made lunches for his wife day in and day out. Recently while she was at a conference in San Francisco, she convinced him to take a class at the culinary arts school, where he got to cook seafood with a professional chef. When he returned, he humbly reported that the class had voted his dish best of all.

Edward cared about those others had forgotten. He felt compassionately for those who had so little. He bought umbrellas to hand out to the homeless when it rained. He volunteered at the food bank. He wrote editorials championing causes for people who were not heard. He rarely sent them to the newspapers but still he felt compelled to write about their story. He volunteered with charities following the Katrina disaster to help provide for families relocating to the Los Angeles area. He even wanted to house the stranded dogs.

Edward loved animals. He aspired to be a foster parent for rescue dogs, however the first dog they received he fell in love with and Winston became the new member of their family.

Because Edward had the gift of contributing to the needs of others, Edward gave generously. He remained devoted to one another in brotherly love, and Edward honored one another above himself.”

Interview with Rev. Adam Donner

Rev. Donner submitted two sermons that I felt needed to be included. Rather than repeat some of the more generic questions from Peter's funeral sermon, I have asked only questions unique to this particular sermon.

1. There's no mention of the resurrection. Is that intentional? Why or why not?

For a non-Christian, my hope is to make a point of contact between their life and what God has done in their life even if he was unaware. There is much about the resurrection in the rest of the service. I also make sure I do not overly force the salvation message particularly when family members are asking the question – “Did this person ever make a commitment of faith?” I want to make sure they feel as if God was at work in their life. It is not up to me to determine how God will respond. I also try to avoid making empty promises of “this person is in heaven.”

2. Did you feel that this sermon brought comfort? Why or why not?

It is hard to say if this sermon by itself brought hope. I think there is some comfort brought by speaking openly about one's life and that God had been involved.

3. In your opinion, should the church be involved in funerals for non-believers? Why or why not?

Yes, I think people look to the church for some hope in times of crisis. I think we can offer much hope.

Sermon on the Occasion of a Death Following Long-Term Illness I

Rev. Anita Bell, former co-moderator of the Presbyterian Coalition, offers this funeral sermon that she preached following the death of Bill, an elder in one of her former congregations. Bill was 60 years-old and he died of mouth cancer about a year after his wife died of ovarian cancer. Bell was well-acquainted with the family, having provided the pastoral care during the death of their mother.

Cancer is likely to be one of the most common prolonged illnesses that will ultimately cause a death that will occasion a funeral sermon. From the perspective of the medical community, it is one of the most physically destructive ways to die. Dr. Stanley Nuland describes it this way, “the disease pursues a continuous, uninhibited, circumferential, barn-burning expedition of destructiveness, in which it heeds no rules, follows no commands, and explodes all resistance in a homicidal riot of devastation” (Nuland 207). While it must be said that many advancements are being made in the area of medical research, cancer remains a common cause of death and preachers should expect to deal with it on a fairly regular basis.

Bell presents this sermon in a structure that assists her in the verbal presentation of the sermon in front of a congregation. It is poetic in nature and carries the theme of the race mentioned in 2 Timothy throughout its logical course. She equates Paul’s passing on of the faith to Timothy to Bill’s passing on of the faith to his children. In this sense, the sermon is directive in nature and gives the congregation some concrete action that can be taken when the service is over. This directive nature was an emphasis for Bell who said, “comfort is not just in the content of the words but in the intimacy of the relationship, the shared grief, the shared

hope. Comfort also comes in direction...knowing that there is a way forward.” Bell believed that “they [the family] needed a vision of how to go on.” This is a perceptive observation on the part of the preacher who knows the family history well enough to be aware of the relatively raw grief of having recently lost their mother and now having to face the reality of losing their father.

Bell carefully speaks to the family of the deceased first and then widens the scope of her audience to include everyone in attendance. In this way she makes the sermon deeply personal and yet tangible for even the casual acquaintance to walk away with thoughts to consider. She emphasizes the importance of Bill’s faith, speaks of how his faith guided him through his illness and sustained him through the death of his wife.

Bell’s focus is on the love of God as opposed to the resurrection of Christ, a strange choice given that the deceased was a believer and even a leader in the church family. Although Bell opened the door for a discussion on how we experience God’s love, she did not speak concerning how God’s love for us manifested itself in Jesus Christ. Therefore, had she spoken of the resurrection it may have presented a disconnect for members of the congregation who are unfamiliar with the faith. Bell also argues that, “we proclaim the truth of the gospel throughout the service and not just in the sermon.” This is a consistent statement with many of the other preachers interviewed for this project. Nonetheless, if the sermon is taken alone at face value, it does not provide hope for the future, it simply states that there is a future. Perhaps Bell considered that statement to be hope in and of itself.

The big idea of this sermon seems to be that there is a need to carry on. The family must carry on as a family unit and they must carry on the faith which has been handed down to them from their parents. Although this is the big idea of the sermon, it would not be accurate to say that this is the big idea of 2 Timothy 4:6-8, which speaks directly to what happens afterwards to those who finish the race in faith. This is a common challenge for preachers who choose their text in an attempt to weave it together with the life story of the deceased.

The strength of the sermon is the clarity of direction for the congregation. They have heard clearly that they are “to have faith in the God who loves [them] and to love each other well.” This is a well-presented idea that has been thoroughly developed. It is not, however, the big idea of the text. The sermon would have been strengthened by a greater discussion of the second half of the pericope which speaks to the coming judgement of righteousness that will be bestowed upon believers.

It is interesting that in the final moments of the sermon, Bell introduces the passage in John 14, where Jesus makes a promise to the disciples, saying, “if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back to take you to be with me where I am.” This is the type of promise that brings comfort in times of grief. “Biblically speaking, hope is the assurance or confidence that God will do what he has promised.” It would have been helpful and to the benefit of the sermon to elaborate on this passage in greater detail. Although the family may have received comfort in the directions provided to them, they needed to hear about hope to determine why the directions even mattered.

Bill
Rev. Anita Bell
2 Timothy 4:6-8

2 TIMOTHY 4:6-8

⁶As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. ⁷I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing

Memorial Message for Bill

Bill was such a **gentle man**...such a **gentleman**

He knew how to **honor**

and **treat with respect** the **women that he loved**

He was a **man of simple faith**

A **churchman**... an **elder**

He loved **Beverly Hills**...

He loved your **fellowship here**

It was sad for him that **grief and then illness** made his **coming** here so **difficult**

Through it all

He **never lost his faith**...

In **these later years** of Bill's life... He was not what you would call an **athlete**

But he **ran the race of life so well**

He understood that in many ways life is like a **relay race**

At the **end** he would need to **pass on the baton**

Like Paul passed on the baton to his son in the faith- Timothy

Bill **ran the race well**

Now he **passes on** ... not one... but rather **three batons**...

- Caroleigh, Amy, Beth, Cheryl

Your dad passes on the **family baton** to you

Keep this family together

The *World* is going to *pull at you*... keep you busy... set other *priorities*...

But **Anne and Bill**... mommy and daddy -**taught you the value of family**

Over worldly success and daily survival

Family was the **air that Bill breathed**

He **fought so hard** this past year to live ...

Not because he was **afraid to die**...

But because **he wanted to live for you**

He didn't want you to have to go on without him

He wanted to **be there for you**... to be **daddy** and granddad

He knew today would be so hard for you...

Bill's **zest for life** came from **being with you** as family...

You are what he lived for...

When **Anne died** and he did not want to carry on...

He pushed through his grief for you...

Today, *Bill passes on the baton* to you...

To **value this family**...

To **yearn** to be together... to **be there for each other**

To take time just to **enjoy each other**

To make sure *your kids grow up with their cousins as their closest friends*

So in true Titcombe style...set the table...

Make all the **foods you enjoy**

But most of all, **make the time to hold this family together**...

- The second baton Bill passes on is to you men...

Anthony, Fran, John, Jeff...

Bill passes on his most precious baton...

He left you the four women on this earth who were **most precious to him**

Love his girls the way **he did**

Hold them as *Precious, Be proud of them ... , protect them*

Love them the way he loved Anne

His **faithfulness** to Anne was beautiful to behold

He took those **wedding vows** – for *better for worse* to a **whole new level**

I remember... getting a call one morning

Anne was in the hospital... one of how many times?

When I arrived... I found DCMH emergency room packed

There were not enough beds...

Anne was on a gurney in a makeshift corner

No room...just bed...supplies in corner/ one **molded plastic chair**

I always wondered who those chairs are molded for ...

I still don't know... but they did not have Bill in mind...

He was so uncomfortable...

Bill had been there since the wee hours

sitting in that chair by Anne's side...

I offered to stay... so Bill could go home, have some
breakfast... stretch...

He just shook his head... no... and he said,

“The day we got married, I promised I would stay right here...”

Anthony, John, Fran, Jeff... love these Titcombe women with that kind of

Faithful, passionate, gentle love

- **Final Baton...** Bill passes on to all of us..

A simple faith...

That faith taught him- that the **family he so loved was a gift from God**

That faith carried him through the rough years of **Anne's illness**

That faith helped him **through the pain and suffering** of this past year

That faith helped him make this **final earthly journey**

Bill didn't always understand the ways of God...

But he knew he was **loved by God**

And he trusted God with his life...

There were times that Bill was afraid of dying... afraid of those **final moments**

Afraid that since **Anne was not here**, he would be **alone** in those final steps

But all of you were so faithful... you walked that final journey with him...

Caroleigh... your faithfulness

You and John opening your home

Hours of sitting day after day

Your presence with him on **Sunday morning** in those final hours

His last step was not alone

Yet, even though he was **afraid of those last steps**

He was **not afraid of what would happen after his last breath...**

He trusted Jesus' promise

Jesus said, *"I've prepared a place for you... and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back to take you to be with me where I am..."*

Bill trusted that when he took his final breath, he would **pass** from your arms

into **the arms of Jesus...** that Jesus would come back to bring him **home**

Sunday...

Bill knew it would be such **grief for you**

But he also knew it would be such **joy for him**

When St. Paul looked toward his death, he describe his end as a "departure"... the Greek word there was used to describe a boat that is moored to the dock...

pulling, straining against the ropes... wanting to be loosed to sail the open ocean...
This past year this passionate man has been tied to the dock, constrained more and more by a physical body that was failing him... Sunday, he was set free from all that caused him pain and quieted his voice.

Bill ran his **race with such integrity**,

Such **love and faith...**

Such a **quiet zeal for life...**

Now he **passes on the legacy** to you

To have **faith in the God who loves you**

And to **love each other well...**

Interview with Rev. Anita Bell

1. Not including the time that you spend with the family, how long does it usually take for you to prepare your funeral messages?

My preparation takes about 4-5 hours.

2. Given the unique circumstances surrounding the death that precipitated this message, how long did it take you to prepare?

I used about 4-5 hours in preparation, because I use a similar process regardless of the situation of the death in my preparation of the message.

3. How does your preparation for funeral sermons/homilies differ from your Sunday morning preparations?

I have already done the scriptural study on most of the passages that I typically use for a funeral homily, so that work is already done ahead of the message preparation. The intended audience is much more specific, so my focus is narrowed to try to reach that group with the message. Other than these two differences, my process is similar... I try to stay true to the text, to be connected to the real lives of the congregation, to be clear and concise and pithy-(my funeral messages are typically short because the attention span is short in grief). My goal is to proclaim the gospel in the midst of grief, to connect with the grief, to celebrate the life of the person who has died and to celebrate the life they now have in Jesus Christ.

4. What do you feel is an acceptable length for a funeral sermon/homily?

I aim for no longer than 8-10 minutes because grief creates a short attention span.

5. What determines the Biblical content of your funeral sermons and how do you develop that content?

I always start with a Bible passage, chosen often with the family, that helps to articulate the gospel in their context. Part of my time with the family is a gentle Bible study of the gospel hope woven into that passage, and into passages that will be used in other places in the service. The declaration of the gospel hope of the resurrection begins in these family times before the funeral, and often in times before even the person dies.

6. Do you prefer to use standard scriptures (i.e. Psalm 23, John 14, etc.) as a pattern for your funeral sermons/homilies? Why or why not?

I tend to use those passages in the funeral somewhere because they are familiar, and therefore comforting to the family... I tend not to use them for the homily because they are familiar and therefore do not have the punch of a passage like II Timothy.

7. Do you repeat your exegesis each time you use re-occurring scriptures? Why or why not?

I do not redo my study usually, but I do spend time rereading, meditating, and praying before writing a homily.

8. What you perceive as the preacher's role in a funeral?

The preacher should celebrate the life of the one who has died and the life they are called to now in Christ. This usually allows both the declaration of the gospel through the witness of the life of the person who has died, and the declaration of the resurrection hope. The preacher does well to be a comforter, gracious, compassionate, connected with the family in their grief. From that connection then to declare the hope.

9. What do you feel is the ultimate purpose of a funeral sermon/homily?

The ultimate purpose of a funeral homily is to offer God's hope to a hurting people.

10. Should all funeral sermons/homilies have the same "big idea"? If so, what should that big idea be? If not, why?

God's hope to a hurting people can take on different aspects of the gospel, from the celebration of the Christian faith lived by the person who died, to a celebration of the resurrection hope, to a call to community in the grieving process- love one another as I have loved you gospel - to the hope of reunion with loved ones...

11. You briefly gloss-over the resurrection. Is that intentional? Why or why not?

In worship, but especially in a funeral, I believe that we proclaim the truth of the gospel throughout the service and not just in the homily/sermon. The resurrection is proclaimed, explained, celebrated from the initial call to worship, the selection of an extensive group of readings done at the opening of the service, in the transitional comments from prayer, to scripture to homily... and in the benediction and committal service pieces. I am very intentional about proclaiming the resurrection, which is our hope in the midst of grief; however, the homily in this service was important for a different purpose.

12. It seems that this is a very directive sermon, not focused so much on comfort. Did you intend for it to be that way? Why or why not?

Comfort is not just in the content of the words but in the intimacy of the relationship, the shared grief, the shared hope... comfort also comes in direction... knowing that there is a way forward... hearing the hope of your loved one in that direction... hearing the call of God that leads us through the grief and into life. When Jesus sat with his disciples that last night, he called them to be productive vines right after he said "do not be troubled..." direction is a very tangible way of offering comfort, very biblical, very pastoral. Not all of my funeral homilies are so designed, but for this family feeling devastated by the loss of the person who held them together... they needed a vision of how to go on.

13. Would you say that you use one sermon with modifications or unique sermons for each funeral?

I use a unique sermon each time, because the family and the person who died are unique. The format of the whole service is usually very similar, however.

14. Is the structure of your funeral sermon/homily similar to your typical Sunday morning sermon? Why or why not?

I use many different styles of structure for my Sunday morning sermons, so my funeral homilies are as varied as my Sunday morning experiences.

15. Who do you consider to be your primary audience at a funeral?

My primary audience is the grieving family.

16. Do you use notes when you preach at funeral?

I use notes, but not a manuscript.

17. What kind of feedback (positive or negative) did you receive after this specific sermon?

The family gave the typical feedback after the service itself of gratitude for a personalized experience. The more specific feedback came this year on the anniversary of the death, when the sisters asked for a copy of the homily to share again as they gathered to remember their dad on that day.

18. Is there anything that makes preaching at funerals unique from preaching on other occasions?

Preaching at a funeral is much more taxing, because I am drawn empathetically into the grief of the family. Their emotion becomes mine. It is a challenge to keep my voice clear, my words strong, with the weight of such emotion.

Sermon on the Occasion of a Death Following a Long-Term Illness II

This sermon intentionally follows the one that precedes it because it represents a different approach to the same scripture under similar circumstances. Rev. Lyle Buyer is the senior pastor of the McKernan Baptist Church in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. This is a sermon that was preached once and written twice. Buyer rewrote the sermon for the purposes of this project to reflect Dr. Haddon Robinson's approach to "big idea preaching."

Buyer delivered a version of this sermon when his long-time church organist died of brain cancer. Sharon, like many cancer patients, had advance directives which, in her case, entailed directives for her funeral. She is the one who chose the passage in 2nd Timothy.

The central idea that Buyer wanted to communicate to the congregation was that "the God who gives us purpose for living is the God who gives us hope in the face of death." This statement allowed Buyer to not only preach the text, but to use illustrations from Sharon's life that supported the text in a personal way. Unlike the previous sermon that was tremendously focused on the life that has ended, this sermon shifts focus to the life that is to come for a believer in Jesus Christ. This sermon reflects what Buyer believes to be the ultimate purpose of any funeral sermon, which is "to point people to hope beyond this life that give meaning to this life."

Buyer acknowledges that Sharon's death was not unexpected, not unanticipated. He openly admits that all of us will someday be faced with our own mortality. But, he immediately sets up the congregation to acknowledge that they must be prepared as Sharon got prepared when she knew her death was imminent.

Other than a brief introduction of how Sharon chose the scripture for the funeral, Buyer is squarely focused on the passage itself as the center of the sermon. From a structural standpoint, it would appear that Buyer inserted an entire expository message in between book-end illustrations of Sharon's life. This is a particularly pastoral approach in that it upholds the integrity of the Gospel and keeps it as the central focus, while at the same time lifting up the deceased and celebrating her life.

One of the strengths of this sermon is that Buyer anticipated questions that might arise from the text and faces the questions directly in his sermon. One such case occurs when he speaks to the idea of "works righteousness" and reminds the congregation that the crown had already been "laid up" and was not dependent on Paul's or Sharon's good works. By working through the passage verse by verse, Lyle addresses the entirety of the pericope and is able to present it as an entire package as opposed to a buckshot of selected verses.

Buyer used the confidence displayed by Sharon as a proof for the congregation that there is comfort to be found for believers, especially believers facing death. Because of the confidence that Sharon displayed, her friends and family are able to see that she had a comfort in her death that they too might be able to have. Buyer then goes on to explain how to pursue that comfort.

A potential challenge for expository preachers is developing their introductions and conclusions. Buyer has a strong introduction, which is not as vital in a funeral sermon as it is in a regular Sunday morning sermon. Since everyone is aware of the purpose of the gathering, there is not much that needs to be said. However, since a funeral sermon by its very nature has an essence of finality, a

strong conclusion is extremely important. These are the final words that have the opportunity to leave an eternal impression on the listener when they think back on the life of the deceased. Although Buyer's conclusion leaves the listener with a final repetition of the big idea, there is no challenge, no action left for the listener to do, just a final conclusive statement that Buyer is hoping will stick.

Sharon
Rev. Lyle Buyer
2 Timothy 4:7,8

2 TIMOTHY 4:7,8

⁷I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

Subject: What enabled Paul to face his impending death with confidence?

Complement: He knew that the God he had served faithfully had given him righteousness (a right standing) so that he could live with him forever.

Exegetical Idea: A follower of Jesus can face impending death with confidence because the God who gave him/her purpose for living is the God who gives him/her hope beyond death.

Homiletical Idea: The God who gives us purpose for living is the God who gives us hope in the face of death.

Purpose: To enable people to understand that Sharon found purpose and hope in Christ and to challenge them to evaluate their own purpose for this life and hope for the next.

In the back of our minds, we all know that some day we will face death. For Sharon, the stark reality of her impending death was something she faced the last five years of her life. It was in 1998 that Sharon was diagnosed with a brain tumor. And Sharon knew it was serious, so much so that in September of that year, she typed out a page of notes simply entitled, "About the Funeral," and she gave them to her lawyer. Early this week, I was given those notes.

Most of us gathered here today knew Sharon well, and so it does not surprise us that she would take time to plan her funeral. After all, she would want to ensure it was well organized. It also does not surprise us that music would play a key role in her plans. But her commitment to having a plan and having music as part of the plan does not tell the whole story. Sharon ended her "notes" with these words, "I want this to be a celebration of music and Scripture." And she even chose the Scripture. You have just heard the passages she chose for this day, Ecclesiastes 3:1-14 and 2 Timothy 4:7-8.

I would like to take some time today and reflect on the meaning of the second passage, 2 Timothy 4:7-8. It is a very appropriate Scripture for Sharon's memorial, because it was written by someone who, like Sharon, faced impending death. The apostle Paul wrote these words to Timothy from a jail cell in Rome. From the context, we know he was aware that the wheels of the legal system were already in motion to shortly bring about his execution for preaching about Jesus in a world that was hostile to his message.

But in the midst of Paul's reflection upon his upcoming death, he did not panic or lose heart. Rather, he expressed words of confidence. Those of us who have interacted with Sharon in these past years know that she also had a brave resolve in the face of her upcoming death. I remember a visit Jeannie and I made to her hospital room a while back. It was during one of her low points that we thought would be the end. As Jeannie and I prepared to leave the room, we said what we truly believed would be our final good-bye's. We had the tears. Sharon had a look of confidence.

Where does this kind of confidence come from? I would suggest that by choosing 2 Timothy 4:7,8 to be read at her funeral, Sharon wanted us to know where it came from, since these verses hold some profound answers. So, allow me to read them again, from the King James Version, as Sharon requested,

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith; Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love His appearing."

Where does confidence come from in the face of impending death? As I read these words written by Paul, I believe we see that they come from this truth, **"The God who gives us a purpose for living is the God who gives us hope in the face of death."** Let me say that again, "The God who gives us a reason to live is the same God who gives real hope as we anticipate death."

Sharon knew this truth and I believe it's important today that we know and understand this truth as well. So let's take a closer look. There are two key parts to the truth and we'll take some time to explore each one.

First, God gives us purpose for living. Paul did not wait until the end of his life to sort things out with his Maker. No, much earlier he had come face-to-face with Jesus and he recognized that Jesus was God. As a result, he surrendered control of his life to Jesus and everything radically changed. With his surrender came a whole new purpose. Paul was entrusted with the ability and responsibility of sharing the message of Jesus to the ends of the known world. And the New Testament story records how Paul took his responsibility seriously. So now, at the end of his life, he could say he had lived well and had walked with God in the process. He borrowed from the language of the Olympic games of his day when he wrote, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course," or in more contemporary language, "I have

faithfully gone into the ring whenever God has called me from the corner and I've completed every race God has called me to run." He then added, "I've kept the faith." By this, Paul was saying that he faithfully lived out the passion and purpose God had given him as part of His surrender to Jesus.

So, how might Sharon express this? We all know that she likely wouldn't have used sports analogies. No, she would probably have dipped into the world of music. Had she penned these words, it might have sounded something like this, "I've accompanied thousands of hymns sung to worship You, Jesus, and I've led choirs and taught classes to show how music is such a great gift from You. I have kept the faith. I have lived out the passion and abilities You have given me."

And many of us here have benefited from Sharon living out her God-given purpose. I'm reminded of an old story about a little boy learning to play the piano. His mother wanted to get him excited about the potential of the instrument, so when a famous pianist came to town, she bought front row seats. On the night of the concert, just before the concert was to begin, the mother was distracted for a moment and didn't notice her son as he quietly walked up on the stage and sat down at the great big grand piano. With wonder in his eyes, he started playing the song he knew best, "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." The crowd grew silent. The mother realized what was going on and wanted to disappear under her seat. But the great pianist, as he observed it all offstage, wasn't fazed at all. No, instead he saw a great opportunity and he quickly went to the piano himself and whispered in the boy's ear to keep playing. He then stretched his arms around the boy and placed his fingers on the keys and began to fill in with chords and runs that produced the grandest rendition of "Twinkle, Twinkle" ever played.

I like to think that Sharon and God played duets like that many times. Sharon was much more accomplished than the little boy, but even with her amazing talent, in her humanity alone, she could only hit the keys and wave her arms in direction of the choir. But many of you enjoyed how God so often showed up and added His touch and the notes became music that touched our souls.

Because Sharon lived out her God-given purpose and passion, she came to know God more deeply throughout her life and as with Paul, this built in her a great confidence in the face of her death. But that's not the greatest reason for her confidence. No, the greatest reason comes in the second part of the verses Sharon chose. Let's go back and review the truth of these verses, "**The God who gives us purpose for living is the God who gives us hope in the face of death.**" We've seen how God gave Sharon purpose. Now let's look at how He gave her hope.

In verse 8, Paul stated the reason for his hope when he said, "*...there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day.*" Once again, Paul borrowed from the language of the Olympic Games and pictured an athlete receiving a garland wreath placed on his head after winning a race. But it is important to note that Paul does not say that the wreath he was

anticipating was earned by his faithful service. It would be easy to think that Paul had confidence before God because he earned it by his good work, but to think this is to miss two important details in the text. First, Paul said that this crown was “laid up for him.” Literally, that means it was reserved for him. Long before his faithful service was complete, the crown was sized and put on hold in heaven for Paul’s arrival. So, if not on the basis of his good work, on what basis could Paul anticipate receiving a crown in the presence of God in heaven? The answer lies in what the crown was called...a crown of “righteousness”.

What does that mean? Essentially, it means that Paul knew his invitation to heaven was based on the fact that Jesus had made it possible for him to be forgiven and have right standing with God. That’s what righteousness is; a right standing or a restored relationship with God. You can’t read Paul’s writings without seeing this theme emerge again and again. All of us as humans are cut off from God because we’ve sinned. We’ve chosen to live our way instead of God’s. That has resulted in a loss of right standing with God, a break in our relationship with Him that is eternal if not fixed, and as humans, we had no way to fix it. So, God sent Jesus, His Son to earth. Jesus lived a “righteous” life, a life without sin. Because of this, He could face the penalty of sin on our behalf and that’s what happened when Jesus went to the cross. He died for us. He took the punishment for our sin, so that we could once again have right standing with God if we would only admit our sin before God and receive His amazing gift of forgiveness and a restored relationship with God that lasts forever.

Paul stated it so wonderfully in a letter he wrote that we have in our Bibles as the book of Ephesians. Allow me to read from chapter 2, starting at verse 4,

But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in our transgressions...For it is by grace that you have been saved through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:4-5a, 8-9)

No, Paul did not anticipate this crown of righteousness because he had earned it. He anticipated it because he believed that Jesus died to forgive him and restore him to right standing with God. Sharon believed this as well. As her obituary was read from the bulletin today, you might have missed the line that described the most important decision Sharon ever made. No, it didn’t have to do with where she lived or worked. It had to do with her belief in Jesus. Let me read it again, “Sharon trusted Jesus for salvation, was baptized and joined McKernan Baptist Church early in her teens.” Did you hear it? Early in her teens, Sharon trusted Jesus for salvation. Somewhere as a teenager, Sharon realized, just like Paul had, that Jesus had come to earth to die for her sin that she could have right standing, a restored relationship, with God. And like Paul, she said “yes” to Jesus and asked for forgiveness. At that point, a crown of righteousness was sized and reserved in heaven for her, just like it had been for Paul.

It was Sharon's assurance of this that gave her confidence in the face of her impending death. This confidence was affirmed in a conversation I had with Ruby, a good friend of Sharon's who spent time with her one week ago today, just two days before her death. Ruby told me they had a significant visit. They talked about death and about heaven and while Sharon didn't say much, she was very much at peace.

How could she know this peace? Because she knew the truth of 2 Timothy 4:7,8... **"The God who gives us purpose for living is the God who gives us hope in the face of death."** As we celebrate and remember Sharon's life today, I know that she would want me to ask if you know this same truth today. Yes, Sharon knew of her impending death, but this did not crush her because she had been preparing for her death since her decision to trust Jesus as a teenager. What about you? Can you say today that, like Sharon, you have right standing with God? If not, you can follow Sharon's example and ask God to forgive you and restore your relationship with Him on the basis of Jesus' death on the cross for you. Maybe you have a lot of questions about all this and that's reasonable. These are significant issues that are not to be taken lightly. I encourage you to pursue your questions. They are too important to ignore. I would be more than willing to talk with you or help you find someone to talk with about these issues.

Perhaps you are here today and you have that right standing with God. Sharon's legacy leaves another challenge. She pursued her God-given purpose and passion and could face death knowing her life had counted for something. She fought the good fight and finished the course. And so, as life's final chapters came, she knew she had lived well. These times we take to reflect on the lives of others are great times to reflect on our own lives as well.

Today, we have gathered to remember Sharon's life, the life of one who lived with confidence in the face of her impending death. Where did this confidence come from? From a solid belief in the truth of 2 Timothy 4:7,8, verses Sharon specifically wanted us to consider today. And what is the truth of these verses? Simply this, **"The God who gives us purpose for living is the God who gives us hope in the face of death."**

Interview with Rev. Lyle Buyer

1. Not including the time that you spend with the family, how long does it usually take for you to prepare your funeral messages?

Depending on the length of the message, generally between 2 to 5 hours.

2. How does your preparation for funeral sermons/homilies differ from your Sunday morning preparations?

Sunday morning sermons are almost always part of a series so theirs is a kind of building preparation that is obviously not part of a funeral sermon. Because funeral sermons are typically an unexpected addition to the preparation of the weekly sermon, I try to streamline the process by keeping my notes fairly rough. I don't manuscript. Sometimes I even rely on written notes vs. computer written notes.

I generally try to glean as much material as I can for the sermon from my time with the family. I like to listen to stories. Often these can serve as very relevant illustrations. Also, I like to ask the family what the person's favorite passages were. These often determine the passage I will use as my text.

3. What do you feel is an acceptable length for a funeral sermon/homily?

It depends on how many other parts there are planned in the actual service. If there is more than one tribute/eulogy, I typically try to keep the message less than 10 minutes. If there is little else in the service, I may go up to 15 minutes. It also depends on the audience. If the anticipated audience is used to going to church, I am comfortable going 10-15 minutes. However, if the anticipated audience is not used to going to church, I will try to keep the message shorter, probably 7-8 minutes.

4. What determines the Biblical content of your funeral sermons and how do you develop that content?

I have had the privilege of working with a seasoned pastoral care pastor who modeled for me a very practical process. When he meets with the family, he asks if he can borrow the deceased person's Bible, preferably the Bible they regularly used most recently. Invariably, this Bible will have passages underlined or have notes in margins. Within a short period of time, you can typically find those passages that had some significant meaning to the deceased person. There is quite often a passage of comfort or hope included in these texts that fits the context of a funeral quite well.

To develop these texts, I look for a principle or principles in the text that (a) speak to the hope we have in the face of death and (b) give purpose and meaning

to life now. I typically try to thus have a present and a future "take" on the passage.

5. Do you prefer to use standard scriptures (i.e. Psalm 23, John 14, etc.) as a pattern for your funeral sermons/homilies? Why or why not?

Before discovering the process I used above, I often would go to Psalm 23 for a funeral sermon, especially when preparation time was limited. Now, I like to find passages that had some apparent meaning to the deceased person. If the person was not a believer (I do very few funerals outside the church context), I would likely go to a standard passage such as Psalm 23.

6. Do you repeat your exegesis each time you use reoccurring scriptures? Why or why not?

I don't usually go back to old sermon notes, but I know that once I've preached a sermon on one of these standard passages, the exegesis kind of sticks, so yes, I repeat the exegesis. When it is a standard passage, I rarely go back and do new study on the passage.

7. What do you perceive as the preacher's role in a funeral?

I believe it is the preacher's role to offer a perspective on life and death from the authority of God's Word. Eulogies and tributes are important. They help us remember and celebrate the person. But often, people are looking to make sense of what happened. A sermon, based on God's Word, can offer timeless truth. I believe a preacher can make this truth more relevant by using examples, as appropriate, of how the deceased person assimilated God's truth into his or her life.

8. What do you feel is the ultimate purpose of a funeral sermon/homily?

I believe the ultimate purpose of a funeral sermon is to point people to hope beyond this life that gives meaning to this life.

9. Should all funeral sermons/homilies have the same "big idea"? If so, what should that big idea be? If not, why?

I believe most funeral sermons should grapple with the idea that hope and meaning are found in embracing the hope and life offered by Jesus Christ. This may take various forms and wording, but I believe this is the primary message we have to offer.

10. Would you say that you use one sermon with modifications or unique sermons for each funeral?

That's a good question. I would say that I basically want to communicate the same thing...hope and meaning are found in Christ...but uniqueness comes by reflecting on how that hope and meaning were real in the life of the deceased. This is obviously more difficult when little is known about the deceased person's faith journey, or more so, when what is known would indicate that the person did not have faith in Christ. In that case, I would focus on a more generic kind of message on a standard text giving hope to the living and not touch on the deceased person's faith journey.

11. Is the structure of your funeral sermon/homily similar to your typical Sunday morning sermon? Why or why not?

Yes, it is very similar. It consists of an introduction that raises some kind of question...i.e.? Where can we look for hope and meaning at this time?...and then a walk through the passages' answers to that question.

12. Who do you consider to be your primary audience at a funeral?

I believe the primary audience is the family. They are most looking for comfort and meaning. I am mindful that there are people present who may not have a relationship with Christ, but I think they will be most touched by a reflection on the deceased person's walk of faith as opposed to taking the funeral as an opportunity to "preach at them." If the person's life was exemplary to them, they will likely be open to hear why the person was the way he or she was. If the person's life was not exemplary, any attempt to preach to them would likely fall on deaf ears anyway.

13. Do you use notes when you preach at funeral?

I use rough notes when preaching at a funeral, often handwritten. I do this largely for the sake of time. Also, I want to be able to incorporate any appropriate references I may pick up in the tributes and eulogies. I do not manuscript funeral sermons.

14. What kind of feedback (positive or negative) did you receive after this specific sermon?

While it was quite awhile ago, I remember receiving positive feedback, especially when people sensed I shared something of the deceased person's life that rang "true" to them.

15. Is there anything that makes preaching at funerals unique from preaching on other occasions?

Yes, when people come to a funeral, I do believe they are more open to life's big issues. In North America, we really don't like to face the issue of our mortality, but it's pretty hard to hide at a funeral. So, the issue can be addressed sensitively and truthfully. I like to be able to use the deceased person's life as a challenge as much as possible, to say that their hope is based on the most important decision they made and then make reference to their conversion, or to say that their legacy calls us to live for relationships. These are unique opportunities that come at a funeral where we can share the gospel and its implications as it has been incarnated in the life of the deceased.

Sermon on the Occasion of the Death of a Stranger

Preachers are often asked if it easier to give a sermon at a funeral for a stranger than someone that they know personally. I would argue that there is a tremendous freedom for preachers who preach at the funeral of a stranger. This is not to say that there are not challenges such as being able to establish a personal rapport with the family or being able to speak with integrity about the life of the deceased. But, the freedom comes in being able to preach the gospel message unhindered by the emotional connection that would be present with someone they know.

Rev. Stef Piva, lead pastor of the Greenfield Baptist Church in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, preached this sermon at the funeral of a stranger named Grant. Piva tells us nothing about Grant outside of his age. One of the challenges of preaching at a funeral for a stranger is that there is an uncomfortable level of uncertainty that revolves around the faith of the deceased. Many times preachers get calls from the local funeral home requesting a funeral service for someone who was supposedly part of their denomination but had no church affiliation. Certainly church affiliation is not a requirement for salvation, but since a preacher cannot speak what he/she does not know as truth, it cannot be held as the standard for salvation either.

Piva's presentation of this sermon is not in typical manuscript style. He says that he "preaches with notes." Still there is a logical flow to the thought process of the sermon. He begins by acknowledging loss. Loss is a universal concept and it is easy to assume with confidence that even strangers would experience it. This helps Piva connect to a congregation that in all likelihood he did not know.

He goes on to speak about the sanctity of life and how precious life is in the eyes of God. Piva does not shy away from humanity's fall and their need for salvation. In fact, he clearly communicates the choices that humans make that separate them from God. Although we do not see in the text presented what he used to transition, it is clear that he did not just end the sermon in our time of separation. He clearly says, "this cosmic love story does not end here." He then goes on to elaborate on the sacrifice of Christ, the love of God, and the atonement of our sins.

It is at this point that he brings the congregation back to a brief personal discussion of Grant, using Grant's young age to reflect the urgent need for each individual to examine their relationship to God. He specifically asks the congregation : "have you trusted Christ with your life?" Then, in the closing sentences, he speaks to the hope that is available to those who have said "yes" to his question.

Piva admits that he has a tendency to be a topical preacher, which is certainly the case in this funeral sermon and not unique among funeral sermons in general. Although he uses 1 Corinthians 15 as the springboard for the sermon, he pulls on a variety of both Old and New Testament scriptures to develop his sermon.

Piva is one of the few preachers that contributed to this project that uses outside quotations from scholars and theologians. The problem with using such quotations when preaching at a funeral for a stranger is that the authority that might be attributed to these scholars or theologians in a Sunday morning congregation is negated by an audience that has probably never heard of these individuals. This is not to say that these were not appropriate quotes or supportive of Piva's topic, but they may have proven to be more of a distraction than a benefit.

Although preaching at a funeral for a stranger renders the preacher with little knowledge of their congregation, we must always remember that funerals attract quite a few people who either have no faith or are struggling to understand their faith. Words must be carefully chosen so that the Gospel can be presented without distraction. Piva was trying to make a distinction between Jesus and Buddhism, but it was a statement that could've been reworded or deleted so as not to distract the audience.

This is a solid generic funeral sermon. Grant's name could've been replaced with any name. I would never recommend using the same funeral over and over again, but Piva's sermon would be a good place for a generic start.

Grant
Rev. Stef Piva
1 Corinthians 15

1 CORINTHIANS 15

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, ²through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain. ³For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. ¹¹Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

¹²Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; ¹⁴and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. ¹⁵We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. ¹⁷If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. ¹⁹If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

²⁰But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. ²¹For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; ²²for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. ²³But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. ²⁴Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. ²⁵For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But

when it says, “All things are put in subjection,” it is plain that this does not include the one who put all things in subjection under him. ²⁸When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all. ²⁹Otherwise, what will those people do who receive baptism on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf? ³⁰And why are we putting ourselves in danger every hour? ³¹I die every day! That is as certain, brothers and sisters, as my boasting of you—a boast that I make in Christ Jesus our Lord. ³²If with merely human hopes I fought with wild animals at Ephesus, what would I have gained by it? If the dead are not raised, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” ³³Do not be deceived: “Bad company ruins good morals.” ³⁴Come to a sober and right mind, and sin no more; for some people have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame.

³⁵But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” ³⁶Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. ³⁷And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. ³⁸But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. ³⁹Not all flesh is alike, but there is one flesh for human beings, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. ⁴⁰There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. ⁴¹There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory. ⁴²So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. ⁴³It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. ⁴⁴It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. ⁴⁵Thus it is written, “The first man, Adam, became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. ⁴⁶But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. ⁴⁷The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. ⁴⁸As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. ⁴⁹Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven. ⁵⁰What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

⁵¹Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, ⁵²in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on

immortality. ⁵⁴When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” ⁵⁵“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” ⁵⁶The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁵⁸Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

-Death is always hard to face whether it happens suddenly or whether it comes expectedly.

-In death we have loss.

-A loved one is no longer there.

-The hand can no longer be held.

-Death truly is a tragedy.

-Even Jesus never acted like death didn't matter by denying grief or by being piously aloof.

-He was not a Buddhist who taught the suffering was a mere illusion.

-Instead, when his friend Lazarus' had passed away we read “*Jesus wept*” (John 11:35) when he came to his tomb.

-Jesus wept because pain is real, suffering hurts, and death is abnormal.

-That's right, death is abnormal.

-Human beings were not created to die.

-We are not simply freaks of nature randomly spinning in a meaningless universe with no purpose only to die and have our personhood lost forever.

-Instead, the Bible teaches us that we have been designed by a Creator, who fashioned us in his image (Gen. 1:27) looked at his work, and declared it *very good* (Gen. 1:31).

-But if the Bible says this, you may ask, then why is there pain, suffering, and death?

-If God created it all *very good* why are we here at a funeral?

-You see, in the great risk of love that God took with humanity, we were given the choice to either love the Creator or follow our own course.

-This was a necessary risk because unless free choice was given no one could freely choose to love their Creator.

-In our arrogance, however, we walked away.

-Like an unfaithful spouse we sought out other lovers with whom we would try to find pleasure.

-But:

-Instead of finding love we found hatred.

-Instead of finding health we found sickness.

-Instead of finding life we found death.

-As we ran away from the Giver of Life the natural consequence was death.

-The same way that a limb detached from the body loses its life.

-And so death is a reality and death is an abnormality.

-But this is not the way things were meant to be, but it has become the way things are.

-That is why *Jesus wept* when he stood at Lazarus' tomb.

Transition

-This cosmic love story does not end here,
however.

-Although we were unfaithful, our Creator's love never waned.

-In fact, he has done everything in order to win us and woo us back.

-You see the one thing God cannot force from us is our love.

-That we must freely give him.

-And so as he sees us in the mess of our sins he calls out:

Hos. 14:1-2 Return. . . to the Lord your God, for your sins have brought you down. Bring your petitions, and return to the Lord. Say to him, "Forgive all our sins and graciously receive us, so that we may offer you the sacrifice of praise."

-And if we do so he will forgive us.

-Our Great Lover did not remain a distant God.

-If that were the case we could legitimately ask ourselves how a good God could allow suffering in the world.

- But instead, he answers that with the cross.
 - Our Great Lover never abandoned us to our fate, but reached out to us.
 - He humbled himself and became a man.
 - He embraced our suffering.
 - He felt pain.
 - He felt emotionally drained.
 - He was afraid.
 - He felt abandonment.
 - He felt cold.
 - He bled real blood.
 - And he died a real death on a real Roman cross – although he was the only one ever truly innocent.
 - And he did this all to take our place.
 - It was a substitutionary death.
 - One that restored our relationship with our divine Lover, if we so choose to accept his offer.
 - Because again, love cannot be demanded.
 - For the Great Lover is a true gentleman who will not force love, but allow us to choose.
- Rom. 5:18 *Yes, Adam's one sin brought condemnation upon everyone, but Christ's one act of righteousness makes all people right in God's sight and gives them life.*
- Rom. 3:23 *We are made right in God's sight when we trust in Jesus Christ to take away our sins. And we all can be saved in this same way, no matter who we are or what we have done.*
- The Creator, the Divine Lover, the one who is the Author of Life.
 - Yes, the Author of Life and therefore, the Creator who couldn't be conquered by death – because there was no sin in him.
 - And so, we have Easter!
 - Up from the grave he arose!

-Not mystically, but tangibly, in real time and space history.

-Death was conquered and the church was born.

-As NT scholar Michael Green writes:

“The evidence for the resurrection of Christ is so overwhelming that I can come to no other conclusion but that it really happened.”

-And so the one who wept at Lazarus’ grave was also able to say to Lazarus’ sister:

John 11:23 & 25 *“Your brother will rise again.”*

²⁵ *Jesus told her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die like everyone else, will live again.”* ²⁶ *They are given eternal life for believing in me and will never perish.*

-But the kind of life that Jesus offers us is not just like the one Lazarus gets in this story, when Jesus brought him back to life in this world, only to die again.

-But an eternal everlasting life with a new body on a new earth where *the dwelling of God will be with people* (Rev. 21:3).

-The apostle Paul wrote:

1 Cor. 15:51-52 *But let me tell you a wonderful secret God has revealed to us. Not all of us will die, but we will all be transformed.* ⁵² *It will happen in a moment, in the blinking of an eye, when the last trumpet is blown. For when the trumpet sounds, the Christians who have died will be raised with transformed bodies. And then we who are living will be transformed so that we will never die.*

-When we come together at a funeral we are all forced to face our mortality.

-Something our culture is not always that good at doing.

-We are reminded that our time could be up any time.

-Not all of us will grow to be old (and even then die).

-Grant was only 37 years old.

-Older than some of you and younger than many of you.

-The *when* of our death is unknown to us, but the reality that we will die is a given.

-But we can be prepared for our death.

-We can do this by getting our lives right with God and with one another.

-This cannot be done through our trying to earn it by doing as many good deeds as possible.

- But by acknowledging that we are sinners in need of our Creator's grace.
- By placing our lives into his hands and accepting what he has done for us on the cross is the only way to really prepare for death and the afterlife.
- As well as the only way to really get the *life* out of this life.
- True life can only come from the Giver of Life.
- Just like power can only come from a power source.

Thomas Watson (17th century Puritan)

"In this life there is only the contract. The Jews had a time set between their engagement and marriage, sometimes a year or more. In this life there is only the engagement and contract; promises made on both sides, and love passes secretly between Christ and us. But all this is only a preliminary work, and something leading up to the marriage. The glorious completing and solemnizing of the marriage is reserved for heaven. 'Then we will be with the Lord forever'. So death merely begins our marriage with Christ.

(The Godly Man's Picture, p. 242).

- Will you be there?
- Do you know?
- Have you trusted Christ with your life?
- Have you said, "I do" to that Groom that keeps pursuing you?
- To those of us who have we can say:

1 Cor. 15:55 "*Where, O death, is your victory?*

Where, O death, is your sting?"

Rev. 19:9 *And the angel said, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb." And he added, "These are true words that come from God."*

- Death does not have to be the end.
- But, for those in Christ, it is merely the door we pass through unto our resurrection where we will feast with our Creator, Lover, and King of Kings.

Interview with Rev. Stef Piva

1. Would you consider this to be your "generic" funeral sermon?

Yes. I would consider this a "generic" funeral sermon in that I didn't know this person at all and so I was more focused on preaching about the unnaturalness of death and the hope of the resurrection in Christ - a universal truth.

2. What was the key scripture that you based this sermon on?

I would say that this sermon was more a theological sermon than one based on a particular text. My main theological idea, however, came out of 1 Cor. 15, but besides quoting that at the end I don't really use it as a link throughout my sermon. This message basically has two parts. First, death is unnatural and a result of sin and the curse that has fallen upon humanity. Second, there is gospel (good news) in that there is a savior who has conquered death and who promises new life to those who belong to him. (This was also a sermon I wrote before I took any classes with Haddon, or had even heard of the man's existence, so it isn't based on any formula from his particular philosophy - at least not knowingly).

3. What do you find to be the value of quoting outside sources in a funeral sermon?

I mainly quote outside sources to either add additional authority to what I am saying or because the source says something very well. The Michael Green quote is basically one to say, "This resurrection stuff is not just a myth believed by uneducated people." Knowing that many will not know him caused me say "*New Testament scholar* Michael Green..." so people hear, "not all NT scholars are like those you hear on CNN. There are ones who have really studied this stuff and really believe this stuff. Is this necessary in a funeral sermon? Possibly not. I don't spend much time on it. Only a passing remark. So I don't think it is distracting. It may help some. But it probably wouldn't weaken the message to leave it out. The Thomas Watson quote is more because of *how* he says it. He paints a great picture: contemporary and biblical. His wordings are victorious and comforting. Being a historical figure he connects us to our past (the saints that have gone before us) and his wording is somewhat poetic - which can add an artistic and comforting element for a funeral sermon. Another reason is simply that it happens to be part of my style. I love to read and I love to share with people what I have read from others and, therefore, exposing them to a larger council of witnesses. Those are what I see as some of the values, but overall I would say it probably depends on the preacher. I don't see it as necessary or unnecessary, but more, "is the preacher being true and authentic to who he is in his particular context."

4. In regards to the statement, "Death was conquered and the church was born" can you elaborate on that statement? Also, do you think that it opens the door to introducing another big idea? Why or why not?

I am basically trying to say that the resurrection of Christ is the foundational event that started the church. A take off of Paul's idea in 1 Cor. 15 that if there was not resurrection than our faith would be in vain. As a stand alone statement, however, I can see how people might have just missed that one. Good observation. Sometimes, however, I will just say things to make people think and not necessarily explain it. Is a funeral sermon the place to do that? That is always a hard question to answer in that you often have such a mixed group of people. If I am preaching mainly to the grieving family than it is probably not necessary. If I am trying to help people think of Christianity differently and beyond clichés then it probably has a place.

5. Not including the time that you spend with the family, how long does it usually take for you to prepare your funeral messages?

The average length of time I usually put into preparing a funeral sermon is 4 to 5 hours.

6. Given the unique circumstances surrounding the death that precipitated this message, how long did it take you to prepare?

This particular sermon took about 4 to 5 hours to prepare.

7. How does your preparation for funeral sermons/homilies differ from your Sunday morning preparations?

In funeral sermons I think I am more sensitive to the raw emotions that family and friends will be experiencing. I do not want to exploit or abuse them, but I also want to use that to my advantage in sharing the gospel and the truths of Christ.

8. What do you feel is an acceptable length for a funeral sermon/homily?

I feel an acceptable length for a funeral sermon is about 15 to 20 minutes.

9. What determines the Biblical content of your funeral sermons and how do you develop that content?

The Biblical content is usually decided upon by a number of factors. If the person who has died has requested a text or had a favorite "life verse" that they told me about before their death I will usually use that. If the person was a believer as well as the family I will often focus on themes of resurrection (as in 1 Cor. 15 or 1 Thess. 4). If they were not believers or I know that there will be a lot of unbelievers there I will often focus on evangelistic narratives as in John 3, 4, 14. I sometimes also will preach on the comfort we find in Christ and which we

can extend to one another as in 2 Cor. 1. A lot depends on the situation and the context and from there I choose my passage.

10. Do you prefer to use standard scriptures (i.e. Psalm 23, John 14, etc.) as a pattern for your funeral sermons/homilies? Why or why not?

In regards to using standard scripture text or not, again I would say the situation and the context, would determine what I choose. Personally I like to go else where as it gives me more freedom to explore new texts and new approaches, but ultimately I have to choose what will be best suited for this situation. Sometime nothing beats Psalms 23, as many non-Christians are even familiar with it (which is an open door) and then maybe I can help them understand it just a bit better.

11. Do you repeat your exegesis each time you use reoccurring scriptures? Why or why not?

I do not repeat my exegesis each time I use a reoccurring text basically because of time and the fact that I am using it in a very similar context.

12. What do you perceive as the preacher's role in a funeral?

I believe the preacher's role at the funeral is to be a messenger of hope, comfort, and the gospel message.

13. What do you feel is the ultimate purpose of a funeral sermon/homily?

I believe that the purpose of the sermon is the same as the purpose of the preacher - that is to bring hope, comfort, and the gospel.

14. Should all funeral sermons/homilies have the same "big idea"? If so, what should that big idea be? If not, why?

I do not believe that all funeral sermons should all have the same big idea because I do not believe all the situations are the same. For me, the big ideas vary depending on the situation. My big idea will either be the hope that we have in the coming resurrection or the comfort that we can find in Christ or the congregation's need of repentance or of forgiveness.

15. Would you say that you use one sermon with modifications or unique sermons for each funeral?

I do a bit of both. When I do funerals for people I hardly know that are just looking for a pastor and a church to have the funeral in I often use one of a few sermons with modifications. These ones are usually very gospel oriented. When the funeral is for someone I know well and/or who has been part of our church for some time I usually do a totally new sermon. I will often include aspects of the person's own life (testimony) into the messages as well.

16. Is the structure of your funeral sermon/homily similar to your typical Sunday morning sermon? Why or why not?

No. I would say that my funeral sermons are much more topical (although I do use scripture and try to stay true to the real meaning of the passage). My funeral sermons have more testimony in them (of the person who has passed away) and I think even the tone of my voice is different. I tend to speak softer and with more gentleness at funerals than in my regular Sunday morning messages.

17. Who do you consider to be your primary audience at a funeral?

I would say my primary audience at a funeral is the immediate family of the one who has died.

18. Do you use notes when you preach at funeral?

Yes I do use notes when I preach at funerals, but I have a way of using notes that most people are not even aware that I am using them.

19. What kind of feedback (positive or negative) did you receive after this specific sermon?

The feedback that I received after this particular sermon was seemingly positive. I usually have not got a whole lot of feedback from people on my funeral sermons other than the usual, "That was a great sermon pastor." Maybe people are not really in that head space at a funeral.

20. Is there anything that makes preaching at funerals unique from preaching on other occasions?

I would say the biggest thing that makes funeral preaching unique is the raw emotion. In looking at your audience and trying to make eye contact (especially with the family) people are either crying or they are just staring off into space dazed. The atmosphere is usually stiff and tense and you realize how, at this time like no other, the words you say have so much potential to hurt or to heal.

Sermon on the Occasion of a Death by Homicide

On Tuesday, September 7, 1999, the body of Judy, a long time member of Clear Lake Presbyterian Church, was found in her driveway where she had been assaulted and murdered. Dr. Jack Haberer, editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, shares the sermon he delivered at Judy's funeral when he was the pastor at Clear Lake.

This would be considered a rare sermon. While there are certainly a significant number of murders each year, many pastors will sustain their entire ministry without having to preach at funeral for one. Nonetheless, these rare sermons are worth examining because of their rarity and the need for an easily accessible resource should such an event occur.

Haberer immediately addresses the shock that the congregation must be feeling. He admits to his own struggles and fears and questions about Judy's death. Much like Reynolds, he confesses that he does not have all of the answers to the questions that loved ones must've been asking. This vulnerability allows Haberer to stand beside his congregation in their time of deep grief. Having confessed to the questions for which he has no answer, Haberer goes on to elaborate 4 concise statements that he can claim as truth : God placed us in a world of enormous potential, Judy Roder was well-loved, that when Judy was murdered God was in the same place God was in when it was His own Son who was suffering through the horrors of a violent death, and finally that because of Jesus Christ, death does not have the final word.

This methodical approach is very helpful to the listener. The first statement, *“God placed us in a world of enormous potential,”* allows Haberer to lift up the positive attributes of humanity while, at the same time, confessing the fallen nature of humanity. He balances the two so that the hearer does not leave the issue with a sense of utter despair and hopelessness.

He then goes on to speak of Judy. This is the closest Haberer gets to a eulogy in the sermon. He tells fun, comforting stories. He shares illustrations that came directly from the family, enabling him to have a direct connection to the family. And he speaks to Judy’s heart for others, thus inviting the rest of the congregation into the sermon.

The third statement is the one that gets to the heart of many of the questions that arise in times of tragedy. Where was God? Haberer starts out by saying, “God has not spared us the possibility of suffering. But what God has done is enter into that suffering with us.” He then goes on to explain how God has done that. This is a pivotal section of the sermon because if it is presented well can go a long way to diffuse the anger and hurt towards God. “The most comforting news Scripture has for the sufferer is that where pain, grief, and hurt are, there is God. One of the greatest promises in the Bible, which speaks to all of our fears, is bound up in the name of our Lord – Immanuel : ‘God with us’” (Kaiser 13). By establishing God’s presence with us, Haberer is free to turn to the good news of the resurrection.

The culminating statement, clearly the pinnacle of the sermon, is “because of Jesus Christ, death does not have the final word.” Haberer was very intentional in making this the final thought. It is in this section of the sermon that he shares the

scripture upon which the sermon is based. Haberer's choice to include a larger portion of this relatively standard scripture is helpful because it allows the family to see another family respond in the same way to their grief. Then the family is able to see Jesus directly interact with that family and sees that they have the same potential for interaction. It is by sharing the good news of the resurrection that Haberer provides the hope that was sustain the family through this tragedy. "The dominant theme of a funeral service has to be that Jesus Christ is alive. Christ's death and resurrection supply meaning to our deaths. His resurrection provides a stream of grace that enables us to cope with grief" (Peterson 100). By answering the question of "where is God?" first, he is able to clear the path for the delivery of hope in Christ.

One place where the sermon might have gained strength would've been in the second section where Haberer proclaims that "Judy loved well." We assume that Judy was a believer, an assumption later confirmed when Habeber speaks of Judy's encounter with God in glory, but fails to mention that Judy loved the Lord.

Overall this is a helpful, thoughtful, and theological sermon. Haberer spoke words of hope into an extremely tragic and painful situation. And, he did it with grace and an infinite amount of pastoral compassion.

Judith
Rev. Dr. Jack Haberler
John 11:20-26

JOHN 11:20-26

²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” ²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴ Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” ²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

For the past three days, I have been searching for a silver lining. I have not found any. I have looked for some kind of candy coating to put on the tragedy we have witnessed. There’s been none to be found. What’s more, I just couldn’t respond to Judy’s death in that way.

At a time such as this, as a pastor who risks getting close to his church members, I have had to face this tragedy directly. In so doing I have had to address my own worst doubts. I have had to look inside, face up to some of my deepest anxieties, ask some of the toughest questions. Indeed, I have had to ask for myself the very same questions any person would ask when faced with such senseless horror.

I too have had to ask,

- How can God let something like this happen?
- What’s the point of living, if this is how one just might die?
- Is there any reason not to despair, any reason not to spend one’s life as a bitter cynic?
- Where was God this past Tuesday morning?

I have been facing—as you have—these and many other questions. In the process I have also been getting down to the core issues of our faith, of our beliefs. I have been asking myself, “What DO I know? What can I count on? What is sure and true?”

As I’ve wrestled such questions, four things have emerged. Four affirmations have come clear as things I am sure I know and believe.

The first thing I know is that God has placed us in a world of enormous potential. When God spoke into the darkness to create light, the sun and stars were

given the task to generate such light, and they have done so exactly as designed. God created the planets, outlining the orbits within which they would travel; they have done so exactly as designed. God created the earth with its variable climates, differing topographies, mix of land, sky and sea, and in the process, established natural laws by which the earth would be governed; it has done so exactly as designed. God created the plants, which would merge the forces of light and soil, bringing forth food and beauty; they have done as designed. So too, God created the animals, to be governed by instincts and laws of the jungle; even they have done as designed.

But then God created humans. And in their case, God determined to increase their potential beyond that of any other created thing. God intended for humans to be able to love and be loved. Surely God contemplated what the humans would be like if they were designed always and only to love—without interruption. They too would do so exactly as designed. However, such a love would be no greater and sincere than that of a modern day robot, simply following the commands of its maker. God well knew that if the humans were to be able to love genuinely, they would have to be created with the potential to do the opposite: to hate intensely.

For humans to love, they would have to be able to hate and hurt as well. To do good, they would have to possess the potential to do evil. The full range of possibilities had to be within their reach, if their love was to be sincere.

So God did, in fact, create us with such potential.

This week we have witnessed the dark side of that potential. We have encountered unqualified, unmitigated hatred, violence, horror and evil itself.

At a time like this, we might well question if robot life would not have been better. Yet in our hearts we know that lacking that whole range of possibilities, our lives would be lacking indeed.

God created us with enormous potential. Yes, for good and for evil. Yes, to hate and to love.

Which leads me to the second thing I know for sure: Judy Roder loved well.

God blessed us all with 55 years of a pretty amazing person. As spunky as they come, driven by a streak of silliness and goofiness, Judy always would keep you guessing.

When I first met her, I remarked to myself, “Now here’s a country girl.” Unpretentious and earthy, Judy so enjoyed caring for her ranch and raising her horses. If she was out working in the field, and got a bit too hot and sweaty, she wouldn’t hesitate to cool off by jumping in the horse trough. Slimy as it was, it didn’t bother her. I suspect that having an audience of family members and friends shouting, “How gross!” just added to her refreshment.

Daughter Traci, remembers Judy’s favored method of corralling her behavior when out in public. If little Traci was misbehavin’, Judy would pick up her size 10 foot, and

behind herself give Traci a swift kick in the backside. Traci would exclaim, “Mom, someone kicked me.”

Judy would shrug with a surprised “I wonder who could-a done that” kind of look.

Traci recalls, “It was years before I caught on to what she was doing!”

Holiday times in their house were always an adventure. Judy always kept the Randall’s deli phone number handy, because, more times than not, she’d burn the meal and have to get take out instead. On one occasion she blew up the microwave and, in the process, set the oven on fire, too.

She wasn’t too good with the ranch tractor either, especially that time when she pumped the diesel fuel in where the oil was supposed to go.

Yes, my first impression of her was that of a spunky country girl.

But I soon discovered that this is also a person of great depth. Did you know that she earned two masters degrees? On top of that she attended one of the finest theology schools in country, Duke Divinity. She served the greater community as a social worker for 20 years, working with Child Protective Services, one of the most critical but difficult and heart-wrenching tasks anybody can take on in our troubled world.

Judy also served another 20 years as a realtor, but she kept going back to the care of needy children, particularly as substitute teacher for physically challenged children. She would teach them sign language, and was thrilled every time a child finally was able to accomplish what he or she had not been able to do before.

Also in the vein of compassionate care, just a month or so ago, Judy called me to say, “I want to head up the care of widows for the church. I want to be called upon to help people dealing with grief.”

She cared a lot for folks in need. One of our members with whom Judy had grown close is Amy Leon. Not able to attend today’s service, she asked me if I would read some reflections of hers. I do so happily:

What a wonderful friend and caregiver. We first met when eight or nine years ago, as I was recovering from an illness, Judy called me and said, ‘Amy, I’m coming over with some spaghetti.’ And spaghetti she brought—mounds of it! So we sat and talked.

A beautiful friendship blossomed. Known to my children as the ‘spaghetti lady,’ Judy shared her private sorrows and dreams. We giggled over the antics of her animals, grieved the loss of her horse, and struggled through the trials of her husband’s illness. And she lifted me, as well, as two women with a common sacred bond appreciating the connecting love of an unpretentious Christ.

Simply put, Judy Roder lived large in life. And Judy loved well.

But that presses us to ask one very tough question. Where was God on Tuesday morning?

The answer to that is the 3rd thing I know: This past Tuesday AM, God was in the same place God was in, when it was His own Son who was suffering through the horrors of a violent death.

God has not spared us the possibility of suffering. But what God has done is to enter into that suffering with us. Consider: 39 lashings, the mockery and scorn of the crowds, thorns wrapped around his brow and digging into his flesh, stripped naked for all to see, nailed to a cross, a sword driven through his side. Where was God then? He was right there weeping alongside His suffering Son.

God has not spared us the possibility of suffering. But what God has done is to enter into that suffering with us. Any suffering that we have faced or will face, God experiences with us. That includes the grief—with its anger, its sadness, its shock—such as we feel today.

You know, when you are suffering and someone says to you, “I know how you feel,” their valiant attempt to empathize often leaves you wanting to shout, “O, no you don’t! You have no idea what I’m feeling!”

But God can say to Traci, to Michael, even to Judy, “I feel that pain. I am right in the middle of it with you.”

Where was God on Tuesday morning? God was in the same place God was in, when it was His own Son who was suffering through the horrors of a violent death.

All of which leads to the fourth thing I know: Because of Jesus Christ, death does not have the final word.

When it was one of Jesus’ best friends, Lazarus, who was suffering at death’s door, his sisters, Mary and Martha, sent for Jesus to come rescue him. His arrival was delayed—past the point of Lazarus’ death. When word arrived that Jesus was on his way, Martha, the more impulsive of the sisters, ran to the edge of town to catch up with her Savior. “If only you had been here!” she exclaimed. She had the same expectation as most: God is not supposed to let His people suffer!

Jesus responded, “Your brother shall rise again.”

The breathless Martha nodded, “Yes, I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day,” but that gave little consolation for her present grief.

Jesus added, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” She did not know what he meant by that. In fact, even though Jesus did one of the most rare of miracles, raising Lazarus from the dead—to live more earth years

before his ultimate home-going—it would be a long time before Martha would understand.

Martha did learn what He had meant when on the third day after Jesus' death, she went with two others to pour perfumes on his wrapped carcass. There she made an incredible discovery: Death had not had the final word. Jesus was alive!

Jesus overcame death, even the horrifying death he had suffered on the cross. And He forever made available—to whosoever would believe—life eternal, life close to the heart of God, to be enjoyed forever and ever.

Regarding Judy's death, this much I can tell you: Difficult as that death was, it was followed immediately by being ushered into arms of God, ushered into eternal joy. Scripture tells us that "In heaven there are no tears, no sadness." That being the case, I dare say with confidence that she has no memory of how she got there. Neither will she ever find out how she got there. She remembers nothing of the suffering. All she knows is how wonderful it is to be surrounded by love of God.

At such a time as this, there are four things I know and can declare for certain. First, God has put us into a world of enormous potential, both for good and for evil. Second, God has blessed the world for 55 years by sharing with us Judy Roder, for she did good, she loved the Lord and she lived large. Third, God knows the pain of suffering not only directly but also as the One weeping as His loved One suffered. Fourth, because of Jesus and his resurrection, death does not have the final word.

In the final analysis, life wins!

In a time of inevitable questioning, I leave you with one simple thought to carry with you. Someone once said, "What the caterpillar calls the end, God calls a butterfly."



Interview with Rev. Dr. Jack Haberer

1. Not including the time that you spend with the family, how long does it usually take for you to prepare your funeral messages?

One hour.

2. Given the unique circumstances surrounding the death that precipitated this message, how long did it take you to prepare?

Eight hours.

3. How does your preparation for funeral sermons/homilies differ from your Sunday morning preparations?

Totally different. Every Sunday sermon is original. My funeral sermons generally stick to one of about a half dozen texts, and re-use exegetical work and general outlines from earlier use.

4. What do you feel is an acceptable length for a funeral sermon/homily?

10-15 minutes.

5. What determines the Biblical content of your funeral sermons and how do you develop that content?

I always preach sermons from texts dealing with death and/or resurrection. Sometimes the family will request a particular text – which I may just read in the service (most often : Psalm 23) or may expound in the sermon (i.e. 1 Corinthians 15).

6. Do you prefer to use standard scriptures (i.e. Psalm 23, John 14, etc.) as a pattern for your funeral sermons/homilies? Why or why not?

Yes. Frankly, because they say the eternal message to one of the most receptive audiences I ever get to speak to. More fruitful “pre-evangelism” takes place in my funeral services than in most any other setting.

7. Do you repeat your exegesis each time you use reoccurring scriptures? Why or why not?

Mostly, I expound in different ways, but I’m not embarrassed to use exegetical content over again. I can hardly improve on 1 Corinthians, et al.

8. What do you perceive as the preacher's role in a funeral?

To speak a word of hope, regarding the resurrection, a word of comfort for the grieving (reflecting the compassion of the Lord), a word of reflection upon the beloved (a key part of the grieving process is to tell/hear the stories of the person's life, and hopefully include a glimpse of that person's witness to the Gospel)

9. What do you feel is the ultimate purpose of a funeral sermon/homily?

To proclaim the love, mercy and Gospel of God to those present.

10. Should all funeral sermons/homilies have the same "big idea"? If so, what should that big idea be? If not, why?

Yes. That resurrection is the final word for the facing of death.

11. Would you say that you use one sermon with modifications or unique sermons for each funeral?

I use about a half dozen sermons with modifications. Once in a long while I'll introduce a whole new sermon.

12. Is the structure of your funeral sermon/homily similar to your typical Sunday morning sermon? Why or why not?

Fairly much so, but half as long.

13. Who do you consider to be your primary audience at a funeral?

In concentric circles, those closest (and thus grieving the most) to the deceased, moving outward toward those less connected.

14. Do you use notes when you preach at funeral?

Yes.

15. What kind of feedback (positive or negative) did you receive after this specific sermon?

Overwhelmingly appreciative. Many said, "wow, what a difference it makes to have heard this."

16. Is there anything that makes preaching at funerals unique from preaching on other occasions?

It's the best thing ministers get to do: the one time that a minister is irreplaceable (most everything else that ministers do, someone else can do better). While the church may pack out on Easter or Christmas Eve, the number of non-believers attending funerals may be greater; what's more they who think

in totally secular terms 98% of the time suddenly are receptive to the subject of ultimate things. The opportunity to share the love of God with them is one not to be squandered. I treasure that part of the ministry; and I have gained a significant number of unchurched into church membership by way of making our funerals so meaningful.

Sermon on the Occasion of Natural Death

“It is Christmas that makes Easter inevitable” (Schmitz 33). Likewise, it is life that makes death inevitable. The reality is that at some point everyone will die. As medical technology continues to improve we will continue to see an increase of death by old age. For the purposes of this project, I will refer to it as natural death. However, it should be pointed out that, “neither among the top 15 causes of death nor anywhere else in that soulless summary is there found to be a listing for those among us who just fade away. Everywhere in the world it is illegal to die of old age” (Nuland 43).

Natural death will be one of the most common occasions for funeral sermons. Of all of the occasions of death presented in this project, this one would be the one every preacher should be prepared for early on in ministry. “The most tragic death is perhaps – aside from the very young – the death of the very old when we look at it from the point of view of the family” (Kubler-Ross 177).

Rev. Neal Presa, pastor of the Middlesex Presbyterian Church in Middlesex, New Jersey, preached the following sermon at the funeral for his wife’s aunt, Jeewon. The most unique facet of this sermon is that is profoundly impersonal, particularly given his relationship to the deceased.

Presa presents an illustration from the life of the former British Prime Minister, William Gladstone, that sets up the idea that all of us must consider our eternity. The argument is that even the very young need to consider the eternal issues of faith if they are to have a productive life in the present. The challenge to the

congregation is to consider the point of this life if there is nothing to look forward to in the hereafter.

Presa then attempts to transition this illustration into the story in John 11 (which by the way, was neither of the texts that Presa highlighted as the focal texts for the sermon) where Mary and Martha inform Jesus that if he had been there, their brother would not have died. It is through this discussion that Presa brings up the major points of the sermon : that those who died as believers will live again and that believers need to live into the resurrection of Christ in the here and now. He offers brief discussion on these ideas, highlighting that death is not the final word. He states that, “true living is to be found in the resurrected life, a new life in Jesus Christ.”

The problem in this presentation is that although Presa continually asks the question, “and then what?” he fails to answer it when it matters the most. What does it mean that “true living is to be found in the resurrected life?” What does a resurrected life look like? This would have been an excellent opportunity to incorporate an example of Jeewon’s resurrected life into the sermon. I would argue that when it comes to natural death, especially one of a believer, that there is great opportunity to honor the deceased without getting in the way of the Gospel through weaving the stories of their life in a way that reflects their hope and salvation in Jesus Christ.

Although Presa indicates that the inclusion of Proverbs 31 is intentional, to the hearer it appears to come out of nowhere. It is gone as quickly as it arrived. He then returns to death as not having the last word. Whenever a scripture is inserted it

must support the main idea of the sermon. If it does not, it is superfluous and distracting to the congregation, regardless of how well-intentioned it may be.

The sermon would've been strengthened by a clear focus on the conclusion. While it initially appears that Presa is not going to answer the final "then what?" he adds it on as the closing tagline. While this may be an effective closing line, the overall effect is weakened by inserting the distracting Proverbs scripture into the closing argument.

It is hard to determine if there is some action that Presa is seeking from the congregation as a result of this sermon. It may be that he is urging them to consider the "then what" that was introduced at the beginning. The sermon concludes with an important definitive statement that would've been stronger if it had included some kind of directive for the congregation.

Finally, I would not deny that there is comfort to be found in scripture alone. However, Presa may have connected better to his audience if he had verbalized any personal connection to them or to the deceased.

Jeewon

Rev. Neal Presa

Proverbs 31:10-31; John 17:17-26

PROVERBS 31:10-31

- ¹⁰A capable wife who can find?
She is far more precious than jewels.
- ¹¹The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.
- ¹²She does him good, and not harm,
all the days of her life.
- ¹³She seeks wool and flax,
and works with willing hands.
- ¹⁴She is like the ships of the merchant,
she brings her food from far away.
- ¹⁵She rises while it is still night
and provides food for her household
and tasks for her servant-girls.
- ¹⁶She considers a field and buys it;
with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.
- ¹⁷She girds herself with strength,
and makes her arms strong.
- ¹⁸She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.
Her lamp does not go out at night.
- ¹⁹She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her hands hold the spindle.
- ²⁰She opens her hand to the poor,
and reaches out her hands to the needy.
- ²¹She is not afraid for her household when it snows,
for all her household are clothed in crimson.
- ²²She makes herself coverings;
her clothing is fine linen and purple.
- ²³Her husband is known in the city gates,
taking his seat among the elders of the land.
- ²⁴She makes linen garments and sells them;
she supplies the merchant with sashes.
- ²⁵Strength and dignity are her clothing,
and she laughs at the time to come.

²⁶She opens her mouth with wisdom,
and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
²⁷She looks well to the ways of her household,
and does not eat the bread of idleness.
²⁸Her children rise up and call her happy;
her husband too, and he praises her:
²⁹“Many women have done excellently,
but you surpass them all.”
³⁰Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
³¹Give her a share in the fruit of her hands,
and let her works praise her in the city gates.

JOHN 17:17-26

¹⁷Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

²⁰“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

²²The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

²⁴Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵“Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

Is it possible to live your life half-awake and half-asleep, almost in a zombie-like state of existence, just going through the motions, not fully aware of what God intends for you? Living in a half-alive, half-dead state renders us like sitting passengers on a train, looking out the window, and seeing the telephone poles pass and then trail off in the distance, from one pole to the next, just passing by. Living

like this, we can miss the genuine opportunities that God creates for us to discover who He is, what He is doing in your life and others, and what God may be calling you to do and become.

Retired Princeton Seminary president, Thomas Gillespie, tells the story of a conversation between former British Prime Minister William Gladstone, and the son of a close friend.¹ The young man sought the distinguished prime minister's advice on career plans.

"First," he explained, "I plan to complete my studies at Oxford."

"Splendid," replied the Prime Minister, "and what then?"

"Well, sir, I then plan to study the law and become a prominent barrister."

"Excellent," responded Gladstone, "and what then?"

"Then I plan to stand for election and become a member of Parliament."

"Wonderful," said Gladstone, "and what then?"

"Then, sir, I plan to rise to prominence in the party and be appointed to a cabinet post."

"A worthy ambition," replied the prime minister, "and what then?"

"O, Mr. Gladstone," the boy blurted out a bit self-consciously, "I plan one day to become Prime Minister and serve my Queen with the same distinction as you."

"A noble desire, young man, and what then?"

"Well, sir, I expect that in time I will be forced to retire from public life."

"You will indeed," replied the Prime Minister, "and what then?"

Puzzled by the question, the young man answered hesitantly, "I expect that one day I will die."

"Yes, you will, and what then?"

"I don't know, sir, I have not thought any further than that."

"Young man," said Gladstone, "you are a fool. Go home and think your life through from its end."

The foolishness that characterizes this young man's life expresses in many ways how we all sometimes approach life and living, as Christians, as people of God, as beloved disciples of Jesus Christ, as human beings made in the image of our Creator.

From cradle to grave, the span of years we tread this earth are filled with stuff. Yet, at the core of our joylessness, the apathy that plagues our spirituality, the vast chasm of emptiness that fills our souls and hearts with an overwhelming sense of parchiness and hunger, saps our strength and energy and creativity – and we wonder, “Why?”

You work hard.

You pay your taxes.

You exercise and eat right.

You live by the rules.

You go to church.

You put the toilet paper over, not under.

You put the lid back on the toothpaste tube.

But yet, at the end of the day (or the end of the week), you have nothing left to give to your family, to yourself, let alone to your Church family and to God.

Is it we have lived in zombie-like, half-awake, half-asleep life, not knowing the answer to, “And what then?” “And then what?”

Because we live under the tyranny of time,
shackled by demands from every which way
there’s no time to be reflective about “And what then?”

That’s a question for philosophers, and for theologians we tell ourselves.

But, I have to survive, pay my bills, buy my groceries, make a living, get enough sleep to start the next day, and do it all over again.

Sounds to me like a life on a treadmill, with the perpetual motion of the conveyor belt under the feet. The problem is, the rubber material of the belt is fraying...the runner is growing weary and tired, and she can’t seem to understand why.

“And what then?” “And then what?”

Such a question, like Gladstone’s conversation partner, confronted Martha, as she and her sister, Mary, were grieving the death of their brother, Lazarus. Remember Martha was the one, who, when Jesus paid a visit at their home, Martha was in the kitchen cooking a fancy meal while Mary lounged at Jesus’ feet, gazing at him and listening to his voice. Now, Martha uses Jesus late arrival, 4 days late to be exact, to share her gripes and her hope: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died”

And what then?

Well, Martha acknowledges that Lazarus will rise again, some day, at some uncertain future point, what is called the resurrection of the last day.

Little does she know that that future day is not a day, it's not a specific time; that future point is a present person, the One standing in front of you. He's not a day, nor a time in the future, He is the resurrection and the life.

What Jesus does with Martha is two things:

1. He assures her that those who die, like Lazarus, having believed, will live again. And indeed, Lazarus does live again for Jesus calls him out from the grave.
2. He calls her to begin living. That those who are alive now, in the present tense, it's not a matter of waiting for some future point, for Jesus Christ, the resurrection and the life, is here, in front of you, the Lord of heaven and earth. So he says, those who live and believe in me shall never die.

In one swoop, he takes care of both Lazarus and Martha – the one dead, who will live, and the one who is living, who will become alive.

“And what then?”

Such a life lived now lives in the hope that death has been conquered. Sure, we will, at some future point, have to face death. We will confront our mortality, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

But such death is not the last word, and neither should death have the last word while we are living.

True living is to be found in a resurrected life, a new life in Jesus Christ.

Proverbs 31 paints such a portrait of a resurrection woman – a woman with new life – faithful, devoted, a lover of God. Jeewon Imo was such a lady.

And what then?

Death does not have the last word, both at the end of our life, and as we live now. For our life lived for Jesus Christ, now, is a life that will live with Jesus Christ forever.

Such is our hope.

So, to the question,

“And what then?”

“And then what?”

I am the resurrection and the life, those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die, says the Lord.

¹ The Princeton Seminary Bulletin, vol. 21, no. 3 (2000), 279.

Interview with Rev. Neal Presa

1. Jeewon was your wife's aunt. Would you have preached had it been a member of your blood family? Why or why not?

Depending on whom in my "blood family." If it were immediate family (wife, children, parents, sister), I would probably not preach. My emotions would interfere with me clearly articulating what needs to be said. I want the sermon to be about Christ and how Christ touched the life of the deceased, not me and my emotions. I would find it difficult to preach if the deceased were someone very close to me.

2. What are the pressures associated with a funeral sermon given on the occasion of a death of a family member?

Striking the right balance between honoring a family member whom everyone knows (their good sides and bad sides) while comforting the family and challenging the family to consider their own lives vis-à-vis death and resurrection. An extra challenge is the so-called "prophet in his/her family/town", especially in my youth, I can and have been regarded, sometimes, as "little Neal" who is up there preaching. This is more so in my own side of the family than my wife's. But still, because of my youth, I have to remind myself that my authority to speak comes from God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

3. Not including the time that you spend with the family, how long does it usually take for you to prepare your funeral messages?

15-20 hours.

4. Given the unique circumstances surrounding the death that precipitated this message, how long did it take you to prepare?

20 hours.

5. How does your preparation for funeral sermons/homilies differ from your Sunday morning preparations?

The themes of funerals are usually the same: resurrection life in the midst of death, comforting the bereaved, hope. Sunday morning sermons are varied depending on the lectionary texts. Both have the Gospel as their center, but funeral sermons look at the Gospel through the 3 main themes above. This means for funeral sermons/homilies, I must nuance resurrection/comfort/hope. And if the funeral is for someone I don't know, it becomes tricky because I won't know the spiritual condition of the deceased or the family's. But because the family has requested through the funeral director for a Christian minister, there is a high-level expectation that some aspect of the Christian faith will be shared explicitly.

This is a long way to say that for funerals you speak a general message to the assembly about hope and life that doesn't necessarily consider the specific contexts of the assembly b/c hope/life/death touches all lives; for Sunday morning sermons, I have to consider the congregation's changing needs, perhaps specific individuals, community issues, recent world events that everyone is aware of, and bring the Gospel to bear on those situations.

6. What do you feel is an acceptable length for a funeral sermon/homily?

15-20 minutes or 10 pages of manuscript text, double-spaced, maximum.

7. What determines the Biblical content of your funeral sermons and how do you develop that content?

I consider the deceased (their personality, how they were viewed in the community) and the assembly (texts or images that are familiar to them). This sermon for my wife's aunt, she was a ballroom dancer and teacher a great cook – she embodied the woman described in Proverbs 31 and our family saw her in that light.

8. So then, including the Proverbs passage was : intentional or the request of the deceased/family or an afterthought? What was thinking behind including it?

The Proverbs passage was intentional as I considered Jeewon Imo's life (even the shortness of it that I experienced), the history told to me by my wife and her sisters, and me seeing her in action. Even though she was the second oldest sister/imo of five, she was the matriarch of the family.

9. Do you prefer to use standard scriptures (i.e. Psalm 23, John 14, etc.) as a pattern for your funeral sermons/homilies? Why or why not?

Yes, I prefer to use standard scriptures or images, but nuance them a bit to offer a little fresh perspective or a new "angle." I don't think the funeral is a time to inject a new text or offer something radically new, both in interpretation and the actual text. The bereaved family and friends are there to be comforted, to hear hope....in many ways, their emotional/mental/spiritual guards are down. I don't think springing an exegetical teaching moment in a sermon is helpful to them. They probably heard Psalm 23, John 14, John 3, etc. in the hospital through a chaplain or a visiting pastor or myself if I visited the deceased. There's something powerful about hearing those same words brought to life in the sermon at a funeral – they serve as book ends for the life of the deceased and a springboard for the eschatological hope on the other side of the bookend.

10. Do you repeat your exegesis each time you use reoccurring scriptures? Why or why not?

I will look at the text again, examine it a couple more times to see if the context (character of the deceased, context of the assembly) are in sync. I used

the sermon “The Undoing of Death” for one Easter and several funerals. Each time I did, I looked at the text again to be sure that the Scripture passages and the content of the sermon matched the present circumstances.

11. Do you often use outside (meaning outside of the life of the deceased) illustrations for funeral sermons?

Sometimes I used outside illustrations. Of course, if I don't know the person, I'll use outside illustrations, but I carefully select ones that connect with the text and the assembly. In the case of Jeewon Imo, it was important to speak to her sons and husband, as well as some in-laws, who care so much about money and material wealth, thus I used the story told by Tom Gillespie relative to Prime Minister Gladstone.

12. In theory, you could've replaced Jeewon's name with any other woman, thus making it a generic sermon. Was that intentional?

This sermon was especially made in memory of Jeewon Imo. It won't be re-made or re-done for anyone else. I made a unique sermon for my maternal grandmother when she died in 2003; I will not re-work that one or preach that for anyone else.

13. What you perceive as the preacher's role in a funeral?

To be a herald of the Gospel and an agent of healing/comfort/hope. I underline “an agent” because the preacher is one among many that the bereaved will need to be whole again.

14. What do you feel is the ultimate purpose of a funeral sermon/homily?

To thank God (for the deceased's life, for the hope that only God can give, for the gift of Jesus Christ and His life/death/resurrection) and to invite the gathered assembly to thank God in their words/lives.

15. Should all funeral sermons/homilies have the same "big idea"? If so, what should that big idea be? If not, why?

All funeral sermons should be about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The trick is which facet of the Gospel's diamond do you shine light upon. And that will depend largely, again, on the “character/nature” of the deceased, as well as the community/assembly who is there or from which the deceased comes from. For my wife's aunt, she was the functional matriarch of the family. For our former deacon, she was the gentle Energizer bunny who was always eager to help even though she was so sickly and scrawny. For the former, the sermon pointed to Jeewon Imo's life as what I called “a resurrection life,” (the embodiment of what a new life in Jesus Christ looks like), while at the same time her own physical life was resurrected to Jesus Christ. The sermon served two purposes: it acknowledged the character of her life and what she did for the family; and it

offered the hope of the resurrection we have in Jesus Christ as she herself lived in that hope. For the latter, the sermon highlighted the gentle spirit of our former deacon, while describing all of the assembly as little lambs for whom Jesus the Shepherd cares for.

16. Would you say that you use one sermon with modifications or unique sermons for each funeral?

One sermon with modifications for community members I don't know.
Unique sermons for those I personally know.

17. Is the structure of your funeral sermon/homily similar to your typical Sunday morning sermon? Why or why not?

No. The Sunday morning sermon is usually expository with one or two stories. My style is to walk through the text (not necessarily verse-by-verse) and let the text speak to us. Since I use the lectionary about 98% of the liturgical calendar (on rare occasions I'll use an alternative text than the lectionary texts if there is a particular issue/concern that must be addressed), the Sunday morning sermon makes back-and-forth linkages between Old and New Testaments. The funeral sermon is usually one main text, and I lift up a main theme or image from that text and connect it with the deceased, the assembly, and see how that image relates to the Gospel.

18. Who do you consider to be your primary audience at a funeral?

The community, loosely defined (church family, biological family, friends).

19. Do you use notes when you preach at a funeral?

Yes.

Sermon on the Occasion of the Death of a Spiritual Icon

To say that the following sermon is rare would be an understatement. In fact, it is a once-in-a-lifetime sermon because it was the sermon given by Rev. Richard White, pastor of the Montreat Presbyterian Church, at the funeral for Ruth Bell Graham. Ruth Bell Graham was the beloved wife of the Rev. Dr. Billy Graham. Although it can be said that every funeral sermon is a once-in-a-lifetime sermon, this particular sermon is unique because of the world-wide recognition and respect of the Graham family that precipitated media coverage and broadcast the sermon not only to an entire auditorium of mourners but to people all over the world simultaneously.

The temptation to eulogize at funerals is strong. We believe that we are honoring the deceased by giving a “here’s your life” speech. White acknowledges this temptation and does briefly share a few Ruth-centered statements. But he quickly reminds the congregation that “Ruth Graham was such a great woman because she had such a great savior, Jesus Christ.”

The audience was the biggest issue that White had to take into consideration when preparing this sermon. On one hand he knew that he would be preaching in front of some of the most respected preachers and theologians alive today. On the other hand he knew that the secular world watches with intense interest to see how Christians respond in times of trial. The pressure to deliver a sermon that would speak to the heart of both audiences was mitigated when he determined that his ultimate audience was God. This is such an important point because we believe that God is the ultimate authority and judge and that all that we do falls under His divine judgment.

White then proceeds to preach about how Jesus responds to death as illustrated in the story of the death of Lazarus. He speaks of the grief that Jesus shared with Mary and Martha, knowing all along that a resurrection was to come but recognizing that grief is valid for the present loss. He acknowledges the anger that many feel when a loved one dies, but he suggests to the congregation that our anger should be directed towards death itself, not at God in Christ who overcame death.

Then White begins to speak about sin. This sets his sermon apart, even from many of the sermons in this collection. Because sin is such an uncomfortable topic for many that bringing it up in an already uncomfortable venue seems to be something to avoid at all costs. The problem with that is that it denies the totality of the gospel. If we did/do not live in sin, then why do we need saving? White is so convicted of this thought that even knowing full well that his every word was being broadcast he says, “we have this myth in America that to go to heaven all you have to do is die. That is not true. It’s not automatic and no amount of good works can take away our debt of sin. If they could, we wouldn’t need Jesus.”

White does not leave sin hanging in the air. He immediately follows it with the hope of salvation in Jesus Christ. It is at this point that White introduces the illustration of the death of Emperor Franz Josef. The point of the illustration is that no matter how famous, no matter how recognized a person is, they are still a sinner in need of the grace of God. The illustration allows for a beautiful flow that transitions the audience back to Ruth and her approach to her Lord.

The conclusion to the sermon shifts the focus back onto the audience to wrestle with their own personal salvation. White asks the audience not just to reflect

on Ruth's life as a life well-lived but to examine their own lives in light of the cross. He shares a poem that Ruth wrote and asks the congregation if they "know that the Master, Jesus Christ, is seeking" them.

There are times when a preacher is not clear about their conclusion. White's sermon could've been strengthened with a clearer ending point. He makes wonderful concluding remarks and then seemingly out of nowhere introduces the Revelation 21:1-4 passage. In manuscript form it seems as though it was "tacked on" at the last second to provide one final effort to give comfort to the family. It is unclear if this really strengthened the sermon. Perhaps only the final three lines of the sermon could've been used in conclusion.

White was blessed by Ruth Graham in the sense that he could preach her salvation in Jesus Christ beyond a shadow of a doubt. Not all preachers are so blessed. "The thing of knowing the Lord your Savior is something that is not luck; it is a very deep and wonderful experience and I think it prepares one for the vicissitudes of life as it were, the tribals we face" (unnamed patient qtd. in Kubler-Ross 137). Ruth's relationship with her Savior freed White to not have to worry so much about wording and his own integrity in suggesting her salvation. Although no preacher can claim to know the judgement of God, it is always a blessing to officiate a funeral where we know that the deceased internalized and believed in the hope of the resurrection.

Very few of us will ever preach at the funeral of what the world considers to be the great "saints" of our time. White does an excellent job of proclaiming that while the world may have viewed Ruth Graham as a "saint", she viewed herself as "a

poor sinner needing God's mercy." And, in the end, whether one is preaching at a funeral for Ruth Graham or at a funeral for a complete stranger with a sordid history, one is always sharing the story of "a poor sinner needing God's mercy."

Ruth Bell Graham

Rev. Richard White

John 11, Revelation 21:1-4

JOHN 11 (Selected Verses)

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.

²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." ³²When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" ³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days."

⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

REVELATION 21:1-4

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

In Early January there was concern that Ruth was very near death. Her daughter Gigi called to ask if I could come up to the house and visit Ruth and the family, and if I could bring communion. We gathered around Ruth’s bed, Dr. Graham and most of the children were there, we shared the Lord’s Supper, read Scripture, sang and prayed together. The sweetness of God’s Spirit was evident. One of the children, blessed by it all, commented how wonderful it was to have a last communion together.

After I left, Ruth turned to her family and said, “This wasn’t some last rites kind of deal was it? I am not dying yet.” And she didn’t. She lived five more months.

But that is classic Ruth Graham, indomitable spirit, clever wit, love of life. Who of us here can adequately sum up the life of Ruth Graham? A life so well lived before the Lord, a mother figure to many, a heart and home open to people that most of us wouldn’t even let in our yards. Patricia Cornwell captured the greatness of Ruth’s love for others when she wrote: *“She opened her door to all...Had she ever kept a guest book, it would have held the names of drug addicts, thieves, the delusional and deranged, and juvenile delinquents who had committed crimes of vandalism and murder. Important people, ranging from celebrities to politicians visited the Graham house. But it was the lonely, the misfits, Ruth welcomed with special warmth. They were the people she virtually adopted.”*

All of that is true, and more, but if you leave here today only speaking about what a great person Ruth Graham was, I’m sorry, but you missed the whole point of her life. Ruth Graham was such a great woman because she had such a great savior, Jesus Christ. Her life, her love, her sacrifices, her being a mother and friend to so many – all of that was labor prompted by love – the love of Jesus Christ for her, and her love for Christ.

I want to share with you just a few things of what made Ruth love Jesus so much, things she knew and believed about Jesus. And I want to do so from a very fitting passage of Scripture – John 11 – where Jesus comes to a funeral.

John 11:17,20-27,32-39,41,43,44

It’s amazing how Jesus responds to death

Tears –

- How odd because Jesus knows that in 10 minutes he will be hugging and kissing Lazarus.
- Why weep? These are not fake tears streaming down the face of Jesus Christ, but genuine.
- What does this tell us? The tears of Jesus are the tears of God for us. God is not in heaven arms folded saying, “Get over it.” Our God feels for us, He refuses to close His heart to our immediate sorrows.
- To the Graham family, your sadness touches Jesus, your Lord knows your sorrows.
- Throughout Ruth’s life, there were a lot of sorrows and tears, and Jesus, the Man of Sorrows, acquainted with grief, was her ever present help in trouble.

Anger

- Twice we read in this passage that Jesus was “deeply moved.” This means intense agitation, roaring with anger. What’s he mad about?
- He is not mad at Mary and Martha. He loves them.
- We all know this intense agitation with death. *Rage Rage against the dying of the light.* We fight death. We hate it, and there is an anger in us that it is all wrong. We want to live. We feel robbed when we lose a loved one. Jesus shares that anger. We were created to live, not die.
- But whereas we are angry at death, and powerless to do anything about it, Jesus is able to do something about it.

Jesus knows that death is a result of sin

- *We do not love God with all our heart, mind soul and strength.*
That is sin and the wages of sin is death.
- *All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*

- No way we can make up for it. We have this myth in America that to go to heaven, all you have to do is die. That is not true. It’s not automatic and no amount of good works can take away our debt of sin. If they could, we wouldn’t need Jesus.

Jesus knows we can’t save ourselves from sin and death. He can raise Lazarus from the dead, but Lazarus will die again and still be in sin.

Jesus’ anger is not just with death, but with the cause of death – sin. And so although he raises Lazarus, there is still something more Jesus was going to do.

He was going to go to Lazarus’ grave. Jesus was going to go to Ruth’s grave, and to your grave and mine. Why? In order to defeat sin and death. That’s what he did on the cross, to set us free that we might live.

As **2 Cor 5:21** says, *God made him who had no sin, to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God.*

2 Cor 8:9 says, *He who was rich, became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.*

When Emperor Franz Josef died, the grand procession arrived at the closed doors of the Monastery church where he was to be buried. A herald knocked at the gate seeking entrance. And from within the voice of the Abbott called out: “Who are you, who knocks?” The Herald replied, “I am Franz Josef of Austria, King of Hungary.” The Abbott responded, “I do not know you. Tell me again who you are.” “I am Franz Josef, Emperor of Austria, King of Hungary, Bohemia, Galicia, Lodomeria, and Dalmatia, Grand Duke of Transylvania, Margrave of Moravia, Duke of Styria and Corinthia.”

“We still do not know you. Who are you?” The grave voice of the Abbott reiterated.

At this point the Herald knelt down and said, “I am Franz Josef, a poor sinner humbly begging for God’s mercy.” At this the Abbott cried out, “Thou may enter, then,” and the gates of the church were opened.

This is what Ruth Graham loved about Jesus. She knew herself to be a poor sinner needing God’s mercy and she found it in Jesus Christ. He died the death she deserved to die and gave her the life she could never have obtained on her own. And this is why Ruth Graham was such a great person, why she could so easily identify with the outcasts and misfits – she knew this was the starting place and very center of her life, out of which all else in life was ordered – she knew she was an outcast, alienated from God before Jesus brought her in and made her to be a very daughter, loved and delighted in by her heavenly Father.

Is this your starting point – knowing your need of grace and mercy in Christ?

Ruth’s death is an opportunity to celebrate a life well lived, but it is also a gift to each of us to think about what really matters in life, what the central hope of our lives really is. Someday, each of us will be laid in a grave, what then, what is our hope?

Ruth was a writer and poet. How gracious for the family to make available to us here a book of Ruth’s poems, thank you. One of the first poems Ruth wrote as a young girl was this:

*It isn't your gold or silver
Your talents great or small,
Your voice, or your gift of drawing,
Or the crowd you go with at all:*

It isn't your choice of amusements,

*It isn't the life you lead,
It isn't the thing you prize the most,
Or the books you like to read;*

*No, it isn't the things you have, dear,
Or the things you like to do,
The Master is searching deeper...
He seeks not yours, but you.*

Do you know that the Master, Jesus Christ, is seeking you? “What shall it profit a man or woman to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul in the end?” Christ seeks you, to give you His love and His life. Have you let Him have you?

This is what Ruth Graham believed, rejoiced in and lived out of from the time she was a young girl to the very last day of her earthly life. And now, for Ruth and for all who know this grace of Christ in their lives, the pilgrim journey of this life leads to all things new.

Revelation 21:1-4

*Then I saw a new heaven and new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. **He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.***

Close enough for God to wipe away our tears. That is what lies ahead for the people of Jesus Christ.

So although we gather in a hard place today—under the shadow of death—we see the light and hope of the glory to come, all because we have such a great and gracious Savior, Jesus Christ our Lord. Hallelujah, Amen.

Interview with Rev. Richard White

1. Billy Graham is widely held as one of the most respected and beloved Christian leaders, not to mention preachers, of our time. Did you feel a certain level of pressure associated with preaching the funeral sermon for his wife? How did you handle it?

I would welcome and wish upon any pastor a congregation of Billy Grahams. Dr. Graham is the most gracious person. While he has preached to millions, he remains humble in sitting under the Word, letting God speak to him. In times past when both he and Ruth were in church, they would take notes. Ruth's comment, which was made for both of them, is that even the old lambs still need to be fed. I did not feel any pressure coming from Dr. Graham while preaching Ruth's sermon. I did though, feel it from the family. Not that they put in on me. It was all self-imposed! You have to remember that Dr. Graham has said that the best preacher in the family is Ann. But all the children are very good speakers, as was demonstrated in their remarks during the service. I did feel nervous standing before them. The way I handled that was to pray it out before I ever stood to speak. In any preaching event, funeral or Sunday morning, I have to frame my heart with the reality of who my audience is - that it is first and foremost Jesus Christ. I get Christ up in the heart, exalting him, loving him, crying out to God to help me honor him. I then ask God to fill me with love for the congregation before me. In working through my nervousness with the Grahams, I prayed for the pastor's heart of Jesus Christ to love them. I felt the Lord give me that when I stepped into the pulpit. I truly did love those before whom I stood, and not just the Graham family. I sensed the love of Jesus present and flowing through me for the congregation gathered in Anderson Auditorium. If anything came through with a global audience, it too was the Holy Spirit.

2. Not including the time that you spend with the family, how long does it usually take for you to prepare your funeral messages?

Preparing the funeral message takes me about four to six hours. An additional two hours is spent crafting prayers and organizing the flow of the service.

3. Given the unique circumstances surrounding the death that precipitated this message, how long did it take you to prepare?

Ruth almost died in January, but rallied for another few months. But in January I started praying, looking, thinking and writing down ideas for the funeral message. I do this as a practice with people in my congregation who are elderly or very sick. Still, once Ruth's death came, I spent probably eight hours in preparation for this message. Part of this was reading through some of her poetry and listening to a program that was done on her life a few years ago and narrated by Walter Cronkite.

4. How does your preparation for funeral sermons/homilies differ from your Sunday morning preparations?

Time is shortened and the pressure is in the pipe because funerals are all add-ons to the other responsibilities of the week. My regular sermons are often more teaching oriented. A funeral sermon, while conveying truth, is more a time to apply faith than to build it. In a funeral sermon I am far more pastoral. In the time I spend prepping a funeral sermon I do less reading of commentaries and searching out the Greek or Hebrew. I simplify and seek to be more down to earthy and pastoral, exalting Jesus and comforting with truth that applies to this particular family or circumstance.

5. What do you feel is an acceptable length for a funeral sermon/homily?

It depends on the circumstances. If the funeral is a grave-side only and it's 75 degrees outside, then I feel more comfortable talking 10 minutes. But drop 40 degrees and add rain or snow, I have cut sermons to 2 minutes. But if we are inside and it's a normal funeral (I'll explain in a moment) then I feel 15-20 minutes is appropriate. In our church we have a lot of missionaries and part of the tradition that has grown up around those funerals is to bring a lot of people in to talk about the life of the deceased, and sometimes to allow the congregation to speak from the floor. When this happens, and the service gets long, I may cut my sermon from 10 minutes to 5 minutes. But, in all I say in a funeral, my main point is Jesus Christ and the hope of the resurrection in Him.

6. What determines the Biblical content of your funeral sermons and how do you develop that content?

Jesus Christ is the absolute content of the sermon. Regardless of the passage I always focus on Jesus Christ and what he has done for us that we could not do for ourselves (conquer death). I often ask the family if they have any particular Scriptures, OT and NT, that they want read. Sometimes a collection of favorite passages is listed in the bulletin or read during the service. I will usually try to launch my sermon from one of these. But again, as I develop the content, I will focus on Jesus and use the person's life as a backdrop to get to Jesus. (I also do this at funerals with folks I don't really know that well. I have been asked to do funerals at funeral homes for people who do not have a church family. In those cases I will meet with the family and try to find one or two things that I can use to get to Jesus. For instance, I recently did a funeral for a man who loved to fix things. He could fix anything in the house. I talked about his abilities which the family so proudly talked about with me, but used it to talk about the human dilemma of a relationship with God broken beyond our ability to repair. Jesus Christ is the ultimate fix-it man who came to fix and restore our relationship with God. If the person is a believer I celebrate their home going in Christ. If the person is not a believer I am very careful not to preach him/her into heaven or

consign him/her to hell. But I do talk about Jesus as the way into the Father's presence.)

7. Do you prefer to use standard scriptures (i.e. Psalm 23, John 14, etc.) as a pattern for your funeral sermons/homilies? Why or why not?

If the family requests a particular text I will use that. But most often families let me choose. I have used a variety of passages, but if there were any default passages they would be John 14 and then John 11. I usually try to include Rev 21:1-4. Also, with those whom I know to be confessing Christians, I try to include 1 Thess 4:13f., (but usually in the close of the service, after the sermon).

My reason for using John 14 is because it speaks of home, a huge theme since the person who has died has left this earthly home. I also like to use John 11 because it puts Jesus at a funeral. He's been where we are.

8. Do you repeat your exegesis each time you use reoccurring scriptures? Why or why not?

I do repeat the exegesis, at least the large framework of it, but I feel free to lay more emphasis on a particular point if it applies in a greater way to the family or circumstance.

9. What you perceive as the preacher's role in a funeral?

My role in a funeral is manifold. I am there first and foremost as Christ's representative to love and comfort those in grief. With family and the congregation there is a lot of pastoral care that takes place from the pulpit. I am also there to proclaim truth and hope. This is dicey because truth both comforts and challenges. Proclaiming Jesus is a comfort to the Christian, and awkward to those who do not know him. But a funeral is the final gift of every person to consider our own life and death and the reality of eternal life. I don't back away from considering the greater realities, but try to move people toward that in a gracious and loving manner.

10. What do you feel is the ultimate purpose of a funeral sermon/homily?

To lift up Jesus Christ in such a way that the grieving are comforted by Him and those far from Him are challenged to consider the end of their days and the reality of the hope Jesus has given us regarding death and eternal life.

11. Should all funeral sermons/homilies have the same "big idea"? If so, what should that big idea be? If not, why?

Yes, to lead people to the great shepherd of our souls, Jesus Christ. Death is a huge enemy. I believe it is imperative to show that Jesus only is the conqueror over death. My stock phrase that is in every sermon or service is: "Death is not the final word, Jesus Christ is. And His name is Resurrection and Life."

12. Would you say that you use one sermon with modifications or unique sermons for each funeral?

I use several sermons with unique modifications in each. The uniqueness comes as I stated above, trying to draw something from the person's life that helps illustrate truth about Jesus.

13. Is the structure of your funeral sermon/homily similar to your typical Sunday morning sermon? Why or why not?

It is fairly similar in structure. I have an intro, then read the passage, then explore points and apply them to the context of the congregation. But the funeral sermon structure is usually more simple and the tone more pastoral.

14. Who do you consider to be your primary audience at a funeral?

I know this sounds pious, but God is my primary audience at every service, even funerals. (See John Piper's book, The Supremacy of God in Preaching. Piper's sense of preaching for the glory of God has caused a seismic shift in my preaching as I consider my audience). I am far more concerned with how I speak of Him and that I honor Christ than with whether others like or dislike what I say. But then, the family is my next greatest concern.

15. What are the preaching challenges associated with having a congregational and also global audience at the same time?

In all honesty I rarely think of a global audience when in front of a congregation. I've had a little practice in this as my sermons are rebroadcast on the radio. I am not ignorant of, nor dismissive of a global audience, but my focus remains on those present. For Ruth's service, I was aware that there was a much broader audience, but I crafted my message on what I know is the reality for any gathering of people at a funeral. At pretty much any funeral there will be those who know and follow Christ, those who know they do not know Christ (some of these may be genuine seekers), and those who think they know Christ but do not. My confidence is that the gospel centered in Jesus Christ will speak to each of these categories of people. I have to trust the Holy Spirit to put the message into the hearts of people. That is always my prayer for the Word preached.

Personally, I do not like preaching to an audience I cannot see. I think there is so much that happens with face to face communication that is missed with any other presentation. Also, as a pastor, I love my people and so prefer a regular congregation, those whom I know and who know me. At Ruth's funeral, there were so many people I did not know. This was a pastoral challenge to me, specifically, how to love and care for so many people. Also, there were "celebrity" types present. Some of these, pastors and educators made it a bit intimidating for me. I know a number of them could have done a fabulous job, much better than I did, at least on a presentational level. The challenge for me

personally was to step up to the plate in confidence that I was the one the Lord had called in this instance and that He would provide me with what I needed to honor Christ and bless the family.

16. Do you use notes when you preach at funeral?

I do use notes but I feel the freedom to deviate from any note, praying that in all I do I am being led by the Holy Spirit.

17. What kind of feedback (positive or negative) did you receive after this specific sermon from people outside of the immediately family?

I received a little negative feedback from some that the sermon was too evangelistic. But in talking with the family before the service, they requested a strong evangelistic message.

Most of the feedback was very positive centered around gratitude for boldly proclaiming Christ. Several family members expressed appreciation for the pastoral tone of things.

18. Is there anything that makes preaching at funerals unique from preaching on other occasions?

The big unique aspect includes the event of death staring us in the face. You can't avoid speaking about or feeling the weight of this great enemy. Thus, the congregation is mentally and emotionally at a different intersection with God's word than the typical Sunday morning crowd. Also, the preacher has got to be pastoral. People are grieving and they need a heavy dose of the love, grace and hope of Christ.

19. Just out of curiosity did Dr. Graham say anything to you afterwards?

A few of the family wrote me letters of appreciation. Dr. Graham spoke personal words of appreciation at the grave site in Charlotte and later wrote:

Dear Richard,

Words are inadequate to describe my appreciation for your participation in the services for Ruth. So many people commented about your messages. I had one comment from a Baptist leader here in Charlotte who said he didn't know Presbyterians could be that evangelical!

Our whole family loves and respects you. You have meant a great deal to our family. Every Sunday we sit around the dinner table and listen to one of the children telling us about that day's service and preaching your message over – so I get to hear you second-hand.

In deep appreciation.

Sermon on the Occasion of the Accidental Death of a Young Adult

On November 12, 2004, Katie Italiano was killed when her car hydroplaned on a North Carolina highway and struck a tree. She was 20 years-old and alone in the car when she died on impact. Rev. Hope Italiano Lee, pastor of the Valley Forge Presbyterian Church in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, prepared this sermon for a memorial for Katie in the year following her death. Lee is Katie's older sister.

The cause of Katie's death was determined to be blunt force trauma. "Trauma, defined as a physical injury or wound, is the leading cause of death for all persons below the age of 44 in the United States" (Nuland 143). Although heroic attempts were made to save her life at the hospital, clearly they were to no avail.

"You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you" (Lewis 25). C.S. Lewis wrote these words as he struggled through his own grief during the loss of his beloved wife. These words ring true for any preacher tasked with preaching at a funeral for a member of their immediate family. Although all preaching should be done with the utmost integrity, preachers must face life and death issues on a deeply personal level when it comes to a member of their own family. It is one thing to preach resurrection hope to the masses, it is quite another to embrace it in your own heart when it counts the most.

Lee was angry and she admits it. There is no possibility of explaining away death. "It is hard to have patience with people who say, 'there is no death,' or 'Death doesn't matter.' There is death. And whatever is matters" (Lewis 16). To deny or gloss over the reality of death would disengage the preacher from the reality of the

grief of the congregation. Lee has no qualms about asking Jesus where he was or sharing that thought with the congregation. Her introduction is gripping because it plays with all of the “what ifs” that accompany tragic losses such as car accidents.

She uses the words “if only Jesus had been there....then Katie would still be here,” to transition into the passage in John 11. From there she runs the storyline of her grief parallel to the storylines of Mary and Martha dealing with their grief. She goes as far as to say that “we” are Mary and Martha. By placing the congregation in Mary and Martha’s place, she enables them to give voice to things that might have otherwise been buried in their hearts. For example, C.S. Lewis wrote, “not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about him” (Lewis 5). Lee names the anger that could lead to the danger of believing that God willed the accident to happen.

The important move in the sermon comes when Lee makes the statement, “Katie’s story, like Lazarus’ story isn’t about death.” This is an important distinction for Lee personally, to remind herself that she cannot let her grief hold her, rendering her incapable of finishing the story. It also serves to remind the congregation that the sermon is not over.

From that point on the focus is on salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. John 11:25 is the verse that many in the congregation would’ve been familiar with... “I am the resurrection and the life... .” However, Lee wants to put the emphasis on the second half of verse 26 where Jesus asks, “do you believe this?” Familiarity is important and the first part of the verse is familiar. But, familiarity without belief is useless.

It is obvious that this sermon comes from a pastor's heart and a sister's heart. There is comfort to be found and questions left for each member of the congregation to address.

A weakness of the sermon is the noticeable lack of a discussion surrounding sin and our fallen humanity. This creates a problem because, like many of the other sermons, it skips right to the good news without explaining why we need the good news in the first place. It could be argued that the text itself does not support such a big idea, however, this would be the one place where topical theological doctrine must be included regardless of an expository approach to preaching.

The sermon may also have been enhanced by a further discussion of God's role in our suffering and the will of God in times of great tragedy.

Katie
Rev. Hope Italiano Lee
John 11:1-45

JOHN 11:1-45

¹Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." ¹¹After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." ¹²The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." ²⁸When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." ²⁹And when she heard

it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³²When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” ³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

⁴⁵Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

If only.... it hadn't rained so hard that day. If only.... she hadn't been by herself. If only.... her car had hydroplaned an inch to the left or an inch to the right. If only, I think to myself, had Jesus been there... then Katie would still be here.

I know how it feels to be Mary and Martha, rushing out to Jesus and screaming, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” That's how I felt on November 12th when the hospital chaplain told me, “we did everything we could possibly do.” “Lord,” I screamed, “if you had been here, my sister would not have died.”

That's grief talking. That's pain and hurt and anger. Maybe it surprises you, that a pastor, a faithful disciple of the Lord, got so angry and so frustrated with God. It's not that I didn't love the Lord with all my heart and soul and mind. It's that I loved my baby sister so much and she was too young to die.

There didn't seem to be anywhere to place blame. Katie wasn't drinking. There wasn't another car involved. She was well-rested. Her car didn't fail her. She wasn't on a cell phone. When the police officer took me to the scene of the crash he said, "it was like a million little things all went wrong at the same time and if even one of them had gone right, she would've made it."

Clearly, that's similar to how Mary and Martha felt when Lazarus was dying. If Jesus would've just made it in time then her brother wouldn't have died. But Katie's story, like Lazarus's story isn't about death. It's a story of faith and hope that one day, maybe not today, we'll be able to understand. Because today, we're Mary and Martha at the beginning of this chapter in John. We are here because we loved Katie. We loved her smile, her unbelievable generosity, her commitment and love for her family. And the idea that death has captured her is too unbearable to even want to comprehend.

That's why we get angry. Why does death get to win when it comes to a 20 year-old? That's not fair. It's not right. It goes against everything we want, we hope, we dream. Death shouldn't win.

But the message of Jesus Christ is that when it comes to my sister, death didn't win. Like Mary and Martha, very early on in this passage, we think death won. All Mary and Martha know is that Lazarus is dead and they are convinced that Jesus could've changed the outcome. But the truth of the Gospel, the very heart of the Gospel, is that Jesus did change the outcome. Take a look with me at verse 25. "Jesus said to them, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.'"

Katie believed in Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior. Although she was raised as a 4th generation Presbyterian, when she was 15 she decided to wrestle with her faith, to not go willingly along with some doctrine, but to go out and make the choice as an adult to claim Christ as her very own. For three years she went through the Lutheran Catechesis and ultimately joined the Lutheran Church. But for Katie, it wasn't about finding a church that "did church" the way she thought it should be done, for Katie it was about deciding whether or not she truly believed in Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior. In the end, after all the searching was done, she truly believed.

So, for Katie, whether she had died at 20 or 108, the outcome was going to be the same. Death would never win. Katie believed in Jesus Christ and Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and life, all who believe in me will NEVER die.”

And yet, for you and for me, we are faced with one question : “Do you believe this?” It’s the same question that Jesus asked Mary and Martha. Do you believe this? Do you believe that Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life and that all those who believe in him will never die? Because if you believe this, if you place it in your heart the way that Katie did, then despite the anger and the frustration and the hurt and the pain that you feel in this moment, you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that **death did not win.**

I know that each of you is hurting right now. My own heart is shattered. There is not one second that goes by that I don’t consider what each of us has lost in Katie. And I’d be lying to you if I said I no longer want to scream, “if only you were there, Jesus!” But that’s the anger and the pain and the loss talking. Because Jesus was there, just like he was there for Lazarus. And when he got there.... he wept. He wept because he experienced a loss and the people that he loved beyond measure were in so much pain. Jesus wept for Lazarus and Jesus wept for Katie.

But, I beg you this morning, wherever you are in the depths of your pain and your questions and your anger....I beg you to finish the story. Don’t end it where Jesus wept.

End it where Lazarus rose again just like Jesus promised. Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

Brothers and Sisters, do you believe this?

Katie did.

Amen.

Interview with Rev. Hope Italiano Lee
(Author of Entire Project)

1. What made you decide to write a funeral sermon following the death of your own sister?

I was so angry and so confused. My family had received horrific pastoral care at the hospital. I remember the chaplain saying to me, “thank God you’re a pastor. Your family is really going to need you right now.” My family didn’t need me, they needed to know that God still existed, that God still cared. That night at the hospital I didn’t know what to say. I was completely paralyzed. When I discovered that the paralysis had covered my entire family, I had to go and wrestle it out with God. There was nowhere else for me to turn.

For me it was never about being able to prove that as a spiritual leader I could handle the tragedies of this life. It really became my way of dealing with my own grief the only way I knew how....on my knees before God. When I read the sermons that Karl Barth and William Sloane Coffin delivered when their sons were tragically killed, I realized that even some of the best theologians and preachers are, at the end of the day, still human and can still feel pain.

2. Not including the time that you spend with the family, how long does it usually take for you to prepare your funeral messages?

It always takes me about five hours. The first three hours are the initial sit-down. Then I come back to it later to look for clarity and to make sure my words are really what I intend to say.

3. Given the unique circumstances surrounding the death that precipitated this message, how long did it take you to prepare?

Years. It’s original presentation was as a memorial a year after she was killed, but I go back to it and work on it just because it helps me to heal. Katie’s death was so stunning that when her actual funeral came it took every ounce of my being just to stand there at her coffin. I never cared about funeral sermons until she died. Ever since that day I invest everything I possibly can into every funeral sermon, every “Longest Night” sermon, every sermon that speaks to the broken-hearted.

4. How does your preparation for funeral sermons/homilies differ from your Sunday morning preparations?

There is a tremendous sense of urgency about a funeral sermon. I am unable to sit with a text in the way that I would on a Sunday morning. I start thinking about the funeral sermon on the way to see the deceased’s family, especially if they were non-believers or minimally connected to a church.

5. What do you feel is an acceptable length for a funeral sermon/homily?

Unfortunately, here in the northeast, in my faith tradition, 10-minutes is really the maximum of what a congregation will allow before they become restless and uncomfortable. Part of this could be attributed to the unusually high number of non-believer funerals that I have had to officiate.

6. What determines the Biblical content of your funeral sermons and how do you develop that content?

Sometimes there will be a favorite passage of the person who has died or a passage that the family suggests provides comfort to them. Although I love John 14 there was a time when I preached five funeral sermons over the course of two weeks. Out of the great respect that I have for the uniqueness of each life, I went looking for a variety of scriptures that would be unique to each person.

7. Do you prefer to use standard scriptures (i.e. Psalm 23, John 14, etc.) as a pattern for your funeral sermons/homilies? Why or why not?

As I said, I really love John 14. I must say that I have never performed a funeral that didn't include Psalm 23, even for a non-believer. That Psalm is almost a part of popular culture and so even families who have no faith often request it. I do not preach on it. I'm also of the belief that these standards are some of the most hopeful parts of scripture and from my own experience, hope is something that is in high demand on the occasion of death.

8. Do you repeat your exegesis each time you use reoccurring scriptures? Why or why not?

I do not. Time often doesn't permit me to start the whole process over again and clearly the message of the resurrection hasn't changed.

9. What do you perceive as the preacher's role in a funeral?

Every preacher is tasked with sharing the gospel to a hurting world. There is profound hope in the resurrection and there is comfort in knowing that whatever adversities we face in this life, God still matters and cares. I wish that the pastors that I encountered in the time surrounding the death of my sister had offered me hope and ushered in the light of that hope in the resurrection instead of blocking the door with trite clichés.

10. What do you feel is the ultimate purpose of a funeral sermon/homily?

The ultimate purpose is to make sure that everyone who hears that sermon knows that death is not the final word. I want them to walk away from a funeral knowing that there is no conceivable way that death is going to take away their joy in the Lord. If I am not preaching about the resurrection then I offer those who hear me no hope.

11. Should all funeral sermons/homilies have the same "big idea"? If so, what should that big idea be? If not, why?

In my mind there is simply no good theological reason why all funeral sermons should not have the same big idea. If the church did not proclaim the hope of salvation in the risen Lord, then why should we even bother to officiate Christian funerals. We are in a unique position to offer the grieving something that no one else can offer them....hope.

12. Would you say that you use one sermon with modifications or unique sermons for each funeral?

The final message is always the same. Jesus Christ died for our sins and all who believe in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. How I go about getting there is unique every time because every life is unique and deserves a unique message.

13. Is the structure of your funeral sermon/homily similar to your typical Sunday morning sermon? Why or why not?

Obviously my funeral sermons are shorter. But I approach the sermons the same way. I'm always on the lookout for one crystal clear idea that I was to succinctly communicate to my congregation. One of the places that often gets "cut" in funeral sermons is illustration. When a sermon is only 5-10 minutes long you can't waste words on lengthy introductions or illustrations.

14. What about conclusions?

Conclusions have a power magnitude about them when it comes to funeral sermons. These are the "last words." I find that there is a great pressure to make them really count.

15. Who do you consider to be your primary audience at a funeral?

At the end of the day proclamation is to the glory of God. I have to lay my head down at night and be able to say that I did the best I could for my Lord. Beyond that my audience is two-fold : the family and the curious. I am always conscious to remember that there are some people who come to funerals that may have never graced the pews of a church before. I never want to waste a good opportunity to share the Gospel.

16. Do you use notes when you preach at funeral?

I must confess that when it comes to funerals, I am still a manuscript preacher. There is not enough time to internalize a sermon and there are often many names involved that are too important to forget. Moreover, I am often asked for manuscripts of my sermon so I try to save myself time and have them complete by the time I walk in to start the service.

17. Is there anything that makes preaching at funerals unique from preaching on other occasions?

The greatest blessing of a funeral from the perspective of someone who wants to learn to be a better preacher is that you will always have a fluid congregation. After a few funerals you quickly learn to adapt to a variety of situations. For example, I was preaching at a funeral for a woman in the community at the local funeral home. A drunk man, one that I'd never met, was in attendance and he constantly talked throughout the sermon. From a communication standpoint that presented me with a unique challenge that I will be prepared for should it ever arise again. You learn how to present the Gospel in a variety of scenarios which is important to those who truly take evangelism to heart.

18. What advice would you give to someone considering preaching at a funeral for an immediate family member?

Don't do it. As much as I wanted to deliver the sermon at Katie's funeral, I didn't. I admit that I am a pastor and a preacher. But, first and foremost, I am a child of God. And on that day, I was a broken-hearted child of God that just needed to rest in His arms. There are preachers, even some famous ones, who have done funerals for their children or parents. Karl Barth, William Sloane Coffin, J. Howard Eddington all gave sermons at the deaths of their children. I am more like C.S. Lewis who took a long time to work through his grief after losing his wife.

CHAPTER FIVE

Project Outcomes

As stated in Chapter 1, “the goal of this thesis-project is to examine a variety of approaches to the exposition and delivery of the scriptures on the occasion of funerals.” It “is an attempt to consolidate and organize the resources of many preachers, pastors, and theologians into one accessible reference book as a foundational approach to sermon preparation on the occasion of funerals.”

Chapter 2 is an examination of the theology surrounding death, dying, and resurrection. There are two central theological issues that are discussed : hope in the resurrection and God’s role in our suffering. The chapter includes theological discussion from a variety of theologians and examines several of the historic confessions of the church including the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and the *Heidelberg Catechism*. The chapter concludes with a brief exegesis of several of the more common scriptures passages preached at funerals. A subject, complement, and big idea are given for Psalm 23, John 14:1-6, and Revelation 21:1-6.

The third chapter gives a brief overview of the history and evolution of funerals. As a Presbyterian pastor, I was surprised to find out that my own denomination has virtually no written history of the evolution of funeral sermons in the funeral service. The chapter then goes on to present a streamlined collection of practical suggestions for preaching at funerals. This is an important part of the chapter because many of the resources currently available, for the preparation of funerals, are repetitive and yet each contains a few unique insights. The goal was to combine both the repetition and uniqueness into one concise offering. The chapter

concludes with an examination of how one might approach preaching a funeral sermon using Dr. Haddon Robinson's method of preaching the "Big Idea."

Chapter 4 is an extensive chapter that includes twelve sermons by eleven pastors, including myself. Each sermon includes an overview and commentary and concludes with an interview of the preacher. The sermons are widely varied in approach and method. They speak to a number of different occasions of death. Sermons were solicited either by personal invitation, letter, e-mail, or request for submission on social networking websites.

The challenges faced in preparing this project are far outweighed by the benefit of the end result. For a clearer understanding, I will elaborate on some of the challenges. First, the body of research on death and dying is vast. Likewise the resources available on the topic of preaching are virtually endless. However, resources that link both death and dying to preaching are limited in scale. This is not to say that there are not books available on the topic of preaching at funerals. In fact, many of those resources are cited in this project. Nor is there a lack of availability of manuscripts of sermons delivered by some of the world's greatest preachers on the occasion of the death of someone they knew. But in terms of practical, "common shepherd", funeral preaching resources for the everyday pastor, there is very little available that combines both theory and practice.

Perhaps one of the reasons that very little is available has to do with how we, as preachers, deal with funerals. They occur quickly and require speedy preparation. Unless one is presenting a generic funeral sermon, it is almost impossible to internalize the entirety of the sermon in such a short span of time. So preachers are

faced with a flurry of activity leading up to the moment of preaching, only to be completely removed from it the following day. This is to say that in collecting information for this project, preacher after preacher explained to me that they never once gave a second thought to a funeral sermon after it had been preached. Many of the fifty-plus preachers that I approached to contribute to my project were bewildered at the thought that one might even keep funeral sermons on file. Others explained that they do not even write a sermon, but instead deliver a generic eulogy. One final group shared that sermons are not even a part of a funeral service. The great irony seems to be that for as much importance as we place on funerals in the Christian church, we simply cannot (or much more likely do not) invest much time in their preparation or delivery. We are even less inclined to spend much time reflecting on them once they have been delivered.

Another challenge within the project was finding preachers who were familiar with the expository method of preaching. The majority of preachers featured in chapter four are Presbyterians. Although two of the preachers, Morris and White, are both graduates of Gordon-Conwell, they did not present their sermons in an expository framework per se. Buyer and Piva are classmates currently enrolled in the Doctor of Ministry program at Gordon-Conwell. Buyer rewrote his sermon using the expository method for the purpose of this project. Piva submitted a sermon that was given prior to his current course of study. That being said, even if these preachers had been familiar with the method, all commented that to follow method explicitly in order to prepare a funeral sermon would be all but impossible if accommodations

were not made (i.e. generic preparation ahead of time, greater amount of time between death and funeral service).

It should be noted that every sermon submitted was not included in this collection. It was never the intent to include the absolute best sermons available, nor was it the intent to include the worst. However, I saw no point in including “sermons” that were, in fact, exclusively eulogies. In addition, the majority of the sermons submitted were given on similar types of occasions (i.e. natural death or death following long-term illness).

Despite the challenges, the benefits of this project were exponential. In year one of our residency in this program Dr. Robinson explained that Gordon-Conwell had a two-fold goal. The first goal was to prepare us to be better preachers and enable us to utilize the expository method of preaching. The second goal was for us to be able to teach others how their preaching might benefit from the method. Through the course of study over the last three years I was able to accomplish the first goal. Through this project, I was able to accomplish the second one.

In the course of soliciting sermons for the project, I spoke with over 55 preachers all over the country. Once they got over the initial shock that anyone would want to see a funeral sermon that they had long since preached, they were fascinated by the idea of such a project. Many commented that they wished that such a resource had been available to them early on in their ministries. Many more commented that they wish they could have such a resource now. Several have called back over the course of the project asking to see what others had written and how the

project was developing. Almost every preacher wanted to learn more about “big idea preaching” and the expository method.

As for the preachers who contributed to the project, almost all have asked for a final copy. They have been anxious to see the commentaries on their sermons because they are committed to becoming better preachers. Furthermore, almost all expressed gratitude to be given an opportunity to reflect on funeral sermons specifically. Again and again the comment was echoed that, “I have never given much thought to a funeral sermon once it’s done.”

Clearly there is a growing hunger for education and development in preaching. This project demonstrates that there is awareness on the part of many preachers that preaching at funerals is an often neglected component of pastoral ministry. Throughout the course of this project I have been asked by my local colleagues to meet with them in order to share my findings. This is exciting because it demonstrates a great desire in the church leadership community.

It is my conclusion then, that the goals of the project have been accomplished and that the goals of the program have also been met.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross writes, “it is not in human nature to accept the finality of death without leaving a door open for some hope” (127). Preaching at funerals is not a dying form of proclamation. This project leads me to believe that even the slightest crack in the door could be pushed through to bring great hope... both to those who proclaim and those who receive the Gospel on the occasion of death.

APPENDIX

Scripture for Services on the Occasion of Death

OLD TESTAMENT

Job 19:23-27
Isaiah 25:6-9
Isaiah 26:1-4, 19
Isaiah 40: 1-11, 28-31
Isaiah 43:1-3a, 18-19, 25
Isaiah 44:6-8
Isaiah 55:1-3, 6-13
Isaiah 61:1-4, 10-11
Isaiah 65:17-25
Lamentations 3:19-26
Daniel 12:1-3
Joel 2:12-13, 23-24, 26-29
Zechariah 8:1-8
Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

PSALMS

Psalms 16:5-11
Psalm 23
Psalm 27:1, 4-9a, 13-14
Psalm 39:4-5, 12
Psalm 42:1-6a
Psalm 43
Psalm 46:1-5, 10-11
Psalm 90:1-10, 12
Psalm 91
Psalm 103
Psalm 106:1-5
Psalm 116:1-9, 15
Psalm 118
Psalm 121
Psalm 130
Psalm 139:1-12
Psalm 145
Psalm 146

EPISTLES

Romans 5:1-11
Romans 6:3-9
Romans 8:14-23, 31-39
Romans 14:7-9, 10b-12
1 Corinthians 15
2 Corinthians 4:16-5:1
2 Corinthians 5:1-10
Ephesians 1:11-2:1, 4-10
Philippians 3:7-11
Philippians 3:20-21
Colossians 3:1-17
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
2 Timothy 2:8-13
Hebrews 2:14-18
Hebrews 11:1-3, 13-16; 12:1-2
1 Peter 1:3-9
1 Peter 3:18-22; 4-6
1 John 3:1-3
Revelation 21:1-4, 22-25; 22:3-5

GOSPELS

Matthew 5:1-12a
Matthew 11:25-30
Matthew 25:1-13
Matthew 25:31-46
Luke 7:11-17
Luke 18:15-17
Luke 23:33, 39-43
John 3:16-21
John 5:24-29
John 6:37-40
John 6:47-58
John 11:38-44
John 14:1-6, 25-27

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VITA

Victoria Italiano Lee

Rev. Victoria Italiano Lee was born on January 11, 1978 in Baltimore, Maryland. She holds a B.A. in Religious Education from Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida and a Master of Divinity from Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. She is ordained by the Presbyterian Church (USA) and has served pastorates in Florida and Pennsylvania. She is currently the Lead Pastor/Head of Staff for the Valley Forge Presbyterian Church in King of Prussia, PA.

She began her doctoral work at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in 2005 and is expected to graduate in May of 2008.